

## Harry Potter: Rogue Chapter 1: Thinking and Planning

(Sun 30 Jun 1996)

Harry Potter, supposed saviour of the wizarding world, had been home from his fifth year of school for two days. He had done little since his arrival, other than review the events of his previous school year -- what he had and had not done, and especially what Dumbledore had revealed to him last week in the Headmaster's office after the fiasco at the Department of Mysteries. Fiasco was definitely the best way to describe what had happened: He had been tricked, attacked, gotten his friends hurt, possessed by a Dark Lord, and lost the closest person to a parent he could remember. Each one of those hurt, though each in a different way.

Two days of lying on his bed thinking about everything had been miserable, but it had helped him sort through his emotions. They had swirled from grief to hatred to fear to despair, but had settled on anger. Anger at his loss. Anger at himself for being fooled. Anger at what Destiny had decided to stick him with. Harry found himself getting the angriest, almost to the point of accidental magic, thinking about his conversation with the Headmaster after the battle. The more he thought about it, the more he decided that parts of it just did not add up. He was appreciative of the old man finally telling him things, things that he should have been told long ago, but that was not the main problem. When it came down to it, Harry was really quite displeased because he finally realized how many mistakes the old man had made at his expense. To make it worse, he had not even once asked if Harry had an opinion. Life was always, "Do things the old man's way, and do them without knowing why." It felt like he was being treated like a tool or maybe a weapon. He pounded the mattress several times in his extreme frustration.

As he started thinking about this conclusion, his head seemed to explode in pain. Grasping at his forehead, he panted to avoid crying out and incurring the wrath of his Muggle relatives. Nearly ten minutes later, he felt that the pain in his scar had receded down to its normal level of a dull ache. Voldemort had been very angry, although Harry had been unable to discern why. Apparently, Voldemort was making an effort to block the connection on his end too after the

Department of Mysteries episode. And this was another thing, why couldn't the Greatest Wizard of the Age figure out why this happened to him and how to stop it? At least it was not as bad as his possession had been. How was Harry supposed to defeat Voldemort if he couldn't even be in the same room with him without his head exploding?!

The reminder of his destiny brought back all of the thoughts he had been going over for the last two days. Harry hated what had happened to him and he hated his life as it was now. He was so angry he would have gotten up and thrown things around except that he had finally learned from his mistakes of the previous year. Fits accomplished nothing, and he did not want to increase the problems he already had with his uncle.

But anger was a good motivator, and it reinforced his decision that he needed to do something different. Dumbledore's way was not working for him. He needed his own way, a way without that bumbling meddler in it.

With all of the problems still in his head, he got up and found some parchment and his quill. Dipping it in ink, he began to write. Item after item went on the list. When he was done after nearly ten minutes of furious writing, he had a list of grievances, and they numbered twenty. He could argue that not everything on the list was one hundred percent Dumbledore's fault, but he had a major role in each of them, and was entirely responsible for most of them. The more he thought about the items on the list and how they had hurt him, the angrier he got. As his ink bottle started to vibrate on the desktop, he decided he needed to take matters into his own hands. One thing was certain, he was going to take care of himself and that old man was going to have no part of his life. It was not a complete plan, but it was a starting point. Now he just needed to figure out how he was going to do it.

Glad for some -- any progress at all -- on his problems, he got up, buried his problems temporarily, and went downstairs for the first time since he'd been home. Fortunately, Aunt Petunia let him eat dinner with her family. Afterward, Harry returned to his room to begin dreaming of his own version of his future.

(Mon 1 Jul)

As Harry lay in bed after waking, thinking about what the day might bring -- besides chores -- a speckled owl brought an official looking letter to him. He untied the letter to let the owl leave, and noticed it had the seal of Gringotts on it. He wondered why he was getting a letter from Gringotts. Seeing the letter reminded him to send off a one-line "I'm fine" message to Lupin. Harry wrote the letter quickly and attached it to Hedwig. "Hold on a second, girl, just in case I need to add one more." She hooted and stayed. That set, Harry returned to his post.

Opening the letter, he got a surprise.

Mr. Harry J. Potter,

We are sorry for your loss of Sirius E. Black. We understand that this is a difficult time for you, but we would like to talk to you at your earliest convenience for the reading of the Last Will and Testament of Mr. Black. Please ask for Gorbag when you visit our institution.

Sincerely,  
Gringotts' Last Will and Testament Dept.

Obviously a form letter, Harry thought, but he wondered what it was for. He supposed Sirius must have left him a few Galleons or something, and had it on record with the Goblins. He sent Hedwig off to Lupin.

Harry glanced at the clock. It was still early in the morning. His aunt hadn't given him any chores to do last night, so in light of yesterday's thoughts and decision, he decided he could take matters into his own hands in at least this one way. Getting dressed, he rummaged around in his trunk for his Invisibility cloak; grabbing that, his money bag, and his old school hat, he went downstairs. No one else was up yet, which suited him fine. Putting on his cloak, he slipped out the back door, went over the back fence into the neighbor's yard, and walked to the park. Seeing no one around, he took his cloak off and hid it away under his robes. He also put his hat on to cover his forehead as best he could, as the hat was now a bit small.

Hoping for the best, he stuck out his wand, and about five seconds later, the Knight Bus banged to a stop in front of him. Stan was not there; the conductor was someone new. He considered that a good thing as it definitely lessened the chances of him being identified. Climbing on, he paid his fare and took a seat until the bus came to Diagon Alley. Doing his best to remain inconspicuous, he made his way to Gringotts.

Once inside, Harry pulled out his letter as he walked up to a goblin at the desk. "I need to see Gorbag if you please. I have a letter." Without saying a word, the goblin pointed at a door on the side, it read "Last Will and Testament Dept." Harry went through the door and asked again.

He was ushered into the office of the fattest goblin he had ever seen. The teeth still seemed menacing even on the otherwise jolly face. "Mr. Potter, please have a seat. I see you have received our letter. Shall we begin?"

Harry nodded, still not sure what was going on as the goblin pulled out a single piece of parchment.

"It says, and I quote: I, Sirius E. Black, leave everything I have to my godson Harry James Potter. Not a single Knut is to go to any of my relatives, especially if they are named Narcissa or Bellatrix. That being stated, Harry, I would be pleased if you would give something to Nymphadora Tonks (and be sure to call her that when you give her the gift). Remus Lupin could also benefit from something. I know you're almost of age Harry, but please look to Remus for advice; you can trust him. I would also suggest you let our 'special friends' continue to use the house, but if you need it as a place to live, feel free to kick them out. They have other places they can socialize. I hope I went down fighting, or as the result of a great prank. Harry, I'm sure this is killing you, so please don't worry about me; rather, go out and do the biggest prank you can. I love you, Kiddo."

The goblin now looked at Harry, who had tears in his eyes. This made his godfather's death so much more real, and yet, he truly

appreciated the advice. Looking up at Gorbag, he asked, "What exactly am I getting besides a house?"

Gorbag handed him a small book of the Black assets. Harry flipped through it amazed. "That much?"

"Yes, the Black holdings were quite extensive, and were almost equal to the Potter holdings."

"I don't know what the Potter holdings are. When can I find out?"

"By Goblin Law, any time after you're fifteen, so: now, if you want."

That shocked Harry. He could have known for almost the last year. "Yes, I want to know. Now, if it's not too much trouble."

"Certainly Mr. Potter. Please wait a moment." Gorbag waddled out and was gone for a moment. He came back with another book and handed it to Harry.

Harry looked at it, and was further astounded. "Can you please tell me who manages all of this?"

Gorbag answered, "There are several Goblins who do the job; there are also several other Goblins that Mr. Black had manage his fortune. It is a full-time job for all of them."

Harry wasn't sure how to deal with that much wealth and holdings. Finally, he said, "If it's possible, I would like them to continue for now."

"Certainly, Mr. Potter." Gorbag looked pleased at the show of confidence.

"Gorbag, do you know about what an Auror makes in a year?"

"It depends Mr. Potter, but I believe the general range is from twenty-five thousand Galleons at the beginning, to about fifty thousand Galleons for the senior Aurors."

Harry thought for a moment. "I'd like two bank drafts for fifty thousand Galleons please, one to Tonks and one to Lupin, the ones mentioned in the Will." Gorbag wrote a note. "Also, can you tell me who would have known about the Potter holdings, and could have told me about them last year?"

"Yes. While most of the holdings are in a trust until you turn seventeen, all the gold has been available to you since you turned fifteen. That, as well as your small trust fund, and your annual school tuition payments, were set up by Albus Dumbledore."

Harry closed his eyes and mentally added item number twenty-one to his grievance list. "May I see both vaults, please?"

"Of course, Mr. Potter." He touched a stone on his desk and another goblin came in. Harry recognized him. "Griphook, please take Mr. Potter to both his family vault and the Black family vault."

"Yes, sir. Follow me, please."

Griphook took him to a cart and down they went, much deeper than last time Harry had been here. Harry also noticed that the vaults were much further apart.

"This is the Black vault. There is no key; you just have to touch the door. It now recognizes you as its legal owner." Harry noticed that Griphook had gotten out of the car and stood on the ledge, but he did not come forward.

Touching the door, it started clicking, then, slowly and noisily, it opened. The vault was filled mostly with money, though there was a small pile of jewels. There was also a key the size of his hand with a black diamond in the big end; it was sitting on a pedestal.

"Griphook, do you know what this is for?" The goblin looked in the doorway and only shrugged. Pocketing the key, he walked out and the door closed on its own behind him.

"This way to the Potter vault." They got back into the car, but it went very slowly past several other doors, maybe a hundred yards down the track. Here was another vault door.

Harry touched this door, and it too opened. The Potter vault was also mostly money, some jewels, and another pedestal with a key, this time with a ruby. There was also a letter under the key. He opened and read it.

Dear Harry,

If you're reading this, we're sorry, as that means something has happened to us and we are not able to explain this in person. This key will take you to Potter Manor if you touch your wand to it. You'll also find that if you're already at the Manor, it will take you back here to the Potter vault with the pedestal. The key will stay with you as long as it is in your possession, but if you ever lay it down or store it away for twenty-four hours, it will automatically return to the pedestal so it will never be lost for long. When you get to the Manor, find the portrait in the master bedroom study. Nathaniel will tell you all about the manor. We're very sorry something happened and can't do this ourselves. We love you dearly.

James and Lily Potter

Another connection to his parents. Harry wanted this so badly, but he also wasn't sure how many more emotions he could handle today. Picking up this key too, he put it and the letter into another inside pocket.

"Griphook, can the vaults be opened from the inside, should a Portkey bring me here?"

"Yes sir, but only during business hours. If you open the door by touching it, a car will soon come." The casualness of the answer made Harry wonder if Griphook already knew what the key was for but did not want to answer, or maybe could not he thought.

Another thought came to him. "Griphook, can the contents of my trust vault be moved here?"

"Yes sir."

"And can the contents of the Black vault be moved here too? Or both of them to a bigger vault?"

Griphook continued in his calm manner. "The trust vault is small, so yes, we can move it here. However, it would take one of our largest vaults to hold both fortunes, unless we changed most of the Black fortune to our largest paper notes of 997 Galleons. Even then, it would be tight and we might still need the next bigger sized vault."

Harry had never heard of paper notes. "Please convert the gold in the Black vault and have them combined into a single vault." Harry started filling his money bag when he had an idea. "Do you have a bigger bag? I'd like to exchange some of the Galleons for the notes. I need to make a few large purchases."

The goblin had one, and loaned to Harry. After filling that bag too, they left.

On the cart ride back up, Harry had another question. "Can I exchange Galleons for some Muggle money? I'd like to get a few things at a Muggle store too."

"If I may suggest, Mr. Potter, we can get you a Muggle credit card for those purchases. It is backed by a Muggle bank that does business with Gringotts. We'll automatically pay the balance from your account."

Harry picked up the credit card, though he still got a small amount of Muggle cash anyway. He also picked up the two bank drafts for his friends.

With the thought of some new clothes for once, Harry headed out into Diagon Alley. He saw a "bush hat" in a store window. Liking the look, as well as seeing that the large brim would hide his scar better, he went inside.



After he found a hat his size in black, on the way to the register he also saw a coat made of black dragon hide for sale. The proprietor saw him looking at it and smiled.

"A very nice coat; it is both stylish and practical. It will block all minor spells, and almost all medium level spells too. If that's not good enough for you, it will also reduce the damage of the major spells. There's nothing like dragon hide for protection."

Harry was intrigued. "Interesting, but why doesn't it do more? I know that very few major spells will hurt a dragon."

"Excellent question, young man. I see you paid attention in class. The answer is because it's just the hide. The magic of the dragon does the rest of the blocking, but you can't get that in a coat."

It would take most of a 997 Galleon note, but Harry liked it. After asking about a place that sold magical trunks, he pulled off his black robe, shrugged on the coat, then put his robe back on to mostly hide it. The new hat went on top. He'd been careful to face away from the man while doing all of that. If the man recognized him, he didn't indicate it.

Going down the street, Harry found the shoppe that sold trunks. It took him nearly an hour, but he found a seven-compartment trunk like Mad-Eye's. However, this one was complete with a small apartment, and was self-sizing with a tap of his wand. With a tap changed it down to the size of a walnut, its weight shrinking proportionally, he put it into his pocket. That device had cost him five full 997 Galleon notes and a 251 Galleon note. Still, he was happy and knew he could live out of it for a while if necessary.

As Harry left Diagon Alley, his hunger got the better of him, so he stopped at a Muggle restaurant. He took off his robe as it was out of place there, so his stylish coat got a few interesting looks; otherwise, he was an anonymous happy person. Also in the Muggle world, he got some new clothes after two hours of what seemed like hard work.

Leaving the store, Harry slipped down an alley. Hiding behind a dumpster, he touched his wand to the Potter key for the first time.

The Portkey took him to a large foyer with a fireplace: obviously, the public entrance to Potter Manor. It was very nicely decorated, though quite dusty. There were double doors on opposite sides of the room, as well as a few windows up near the high ceiling to let in light. There was also a large, ornate chandelier. Harry thought it would be dazzling once it had been cleaned and polished.

Opening one set of doors, he saw the lawn outside, and some hills in the distance. Weeds and wild flowers could be seen among the tall and scraggly grass. Closing these doors, Harry turned his attention to the other set. They opened noisily into the house.

It was like one of those mansions he'd seen on the telly. Large, richly decorated, almost too nice to live in. It was also quite dusty and all the windows were dingy. Still, when cleaned up, it would be magnificent. Exploring, he found practically every type of room imaginable, including a large library. This was just what Harry needed. He had a lot to learn and was going to miss the library at Hogwarts -- though he would not have told Hermione that.

Going upstairs, he found over a dozen bedrooms, including the master bedroom. Actually, it was a full master suite, which included a study, walk-in closets, and a full bath. The suite was larger than an entire first floor of the Dursley home. Though coated in dust like the rest of the house, Harry felt like a king in here.

In the study, he found what he'd been looking for: a portrait. It was the only talking portrait he'd found so far.

"And who might you be?" the portrait asked.

"I'm Harry Potter. Are you Nathaniel?"

"Aye. Son of whom? Though I really shouldn't have to ask by how you look. Still, I must know."

"Son of James and Lily Potter. They died fifteen years ago when I was a baby, so they didn't have the chance to tell me about this house. I just found out about it."

"Aye, I felt their passing," the portrait said sadly. Then he brightened, "But we have a new master, and that is good."

"We? Who else is here?" Harry had not seen anyone else.

"Sadly, just I am left to guard the house. There used to be four elves to keep it all up, but they were freed when your parents died. This has been the longest the house has been left unoccupied, and I am just accustomed to thinking of a full staff."

Domestic help was something Harry hadn't expected to have to find. Although, he wondered if Dobby and maybe Winky could be persuaded to come. "Tell me, Nathaniel," which seemed like an overly long name to Harry, "is it possible to live here undetected, so no one outside the property can find me?" He hoped a Fidelius Charm was already in place.

"I'm sorry Harry. While the entire property is Unplottable, it is too big to be put under a Fidelius Charm. Your father tried and could not do it."

"What if I tried multiple charms?"

The portrait paused with an odd contemplative look on his face. "I do not know. I do not think anyone has ever tried that."

Harry decided he'd have to visit the library below so he could read and research that.

"You might try the library on the first floor," Nathaniel told him, as if reading his thoughts. "On the pedestal inside the door, you'll find the catalogue which lists everything there. It can also help you find the book. The instructions are on the inside cover."

Hermione would kill for that, he thought. "Say Nate, where am I? I have no idea which part of Britain I'm in."

The painting changed to show a map of Great Britain, with a star for the Manor. "You're in Northern Wales, Harry."

Harry saw that he was some distance from London, and that it was too far to fly to Hogwarts easily. Still, the beginning of a plan started to form in his head as he considered living here.

Looking at his watch, Harry noticed that it was getting close to closing time for the bank. "Thanks for the info, Nate. I'll be back later." The portrait bid him good-bye as he hurried to the library. The catalogue helped Harry quickly find a book on "Hiding Charms". He also found a book on Glamours nearby. Taking them both, Harry touched his family Portkey and found himself back at his vault, with the door closed.

Pulling his wand out and lighting it, he walked to the door and touched it. It did slowly open. About ten minutes later, a Goblin Harry didn't recognize showed up in a cart and took Harry back to the surface.

Expecting not to be fed back home, he grabbed a bite at the Leaky Cauldron before he caught the Knight Bus back to the park. Donning his Invisibility cloak again, Harry snuck back through the neighbor's back yard, over the fence, and into the Dursley's house. Fortunately, the kitchen was empty, so he didn't scare his aunt when he took his cloak off.

However, he did find them all at the dinner table. One look at his uncle made him cautious.

"What are you doing sneaking in the back door boy?!" Uncle Vernon growled. "And where have you been all day? There are chores waiting for you." He got up and started to advance on Harry.

"Wait a minute," Harry told him. "I'm trying to do something that you'll like, and that will help you."

"Right, like I believe that, boy. What were you really doing? Stealing things?" Vernon accused him.

"No, I was trying to make arrangements to leave." That shut the man up. "Look, if you will give me a week of no chores, I'll leave here forever."

"Forever? No more coming back during the summers, and no more of your filthy kind coming here?" Harry nodded. "And where will you be staying boy? Or do you have money you haven't told us about?"

"I'm planning on staying with friends, those redheads that came to visit here a few years ago," he lied. "Just a week, let me come and go as I need, and I'll be gone." He could force the issue, but he knew that if Vernon Dursley thought it was his idea, it would be a lot easier on Harry.

"Very well boy, one week. You be gone by next Sunday night, or you'll be sorry you were ever born," Vernon blustered.

"As I already wish that at times; I think we're in agreement." Harry left his stunned uncle as he went upstairs. Actually, Harry thought he could be done sooner, but kept that to himself.

Remembering his need from earlier in the day, Harry wrote a short note and gave it to Hedwig to deliver. He hoped this problem would be easy to solve, because if this did not work out, he was not sure what he was going to do in this one area. Harry knew he could manage, but it would detract from his other goals.

With that task started, he picked up the Charms book to read about the Fidelius Charm. By the time he went to sleep, he was quite pleased with his day.

(Tue 2 Jul)

Harry awoke to a normal sound of summer: Ron's owl, Pig, flying around his room. The owl had two notes, one from Ron and one from Ginny. He took them both off and put them on his desk to be read later. To keep Hedwig happy, Harry tossed Pig back out the window to send him home

As he was getting dressed, a small crack caused him to jump and turn around. He found Dobby the house-elf standing there with a note

in his hand. "Harry Potter Sir! I is so glad you is writing me and asking me to come see you, Sir."

"Thanks for coming to see me so quickly." Harry tied his trainers to finish getting ready. He had considered going to Hogwarts to find the elf, but was not sure he could get in without Dumbledore knowing, and that was the last thing Harry wanted right now. "Say Dobby, are you still a free elf?" The elf nodded vigorously. "Then I'd like to offer you a job. Would you come work for me?"

"I'd be happy too, Harry, Sir. Can Winky come too? I is still needing to look after her, Sir."

Harry smiled. "Yes, that would be even better. I have need for two elves. How about ten Galleons a month and one day per week off?"

"Oh no, Sir! Not a Galleon over two, and only one day off per month. That is still more than twice what I make at Hogwarts, Sir." The elf boasted.

"OK, two Galleons a month, but you must take two days off per month," Harry insisted. "Please Dobby, I want you and Winky to be part of my family."

That did it. "Thank you Harry Potter, Sir. You really is the bestest wizard ever."

Harry smiled at the elf. "Thanks, Dobby. Get Winky and we'll go."

"Yes Sir! I will be back with her in a few minutes." The excitable little elf left.

Harry went downstairs to grab some toast for a quick breakfast, which Aunt Petunia grudgingly gave him. So he would not be gone too long, Harry took the meager breakfast back to his room, lest the elves come looking for him and cause trouble. While he waited, he pulled out his broom, Invisibility cloak, and new hat.

As he finished off the last of his toast, the two elves popped back in. Winky still did not look totally normal to Harry's eye, but she did look

better than the last time he had seen her. "Winky, I'm glad you could come. Did Dobby explain everything to you?"

The little female house-elf brightened. "Oh yes, Master Harry! I am very happy to be your elf."

Harry could not help but smile at her, and he could tell she liked that. "Very good. I consider you part of my family now. I won't bind you to the House of Potter, you'll only be my employee, but in every other way, you should consider yourself part of my family for as long as you live."

Winky had tears in her eyes now and Harry wondered if he had done something wrong, at least until she told him, "Thank you Master Harry. You make a good and kind Master. I shall enjoy working for you."

"You're welcome. So, let's go see the house. If each of you will, uh, grab onto one of my legs, I can take us there." They hastily walked up to him and grabbed on, trusting him implicitly. Harry felt silly, but he did not know how else to do this. Pulling out his Manor key, he took the three of them to the Manor. This made Harry wonder if the key would work from inside Hogwarts. He supposed he would find out.

After a tour, the elves were very happy since there was so much work to be done. Harry gave them some money to get more Floo powder, cleaning supplies, food, and anything else they might need. He also gave them the instructions to clean the kitchen, small eating area, master bedroom, foyer, and library first. He'd be spending most of his time in those rooms.

Several missing skills had come to mind last night while he was studying, so he went to the library to get a few more books, especially one on Apparation. Despite all the dust, he enjoyed looking through all the books for the rest of the morning until Winky called him to lunch.

The afternoon was spent reading about the Fidelius Charm, and in walking around the outside of the house to get a feel for its size and boundaries. His Firebolt also came in handy to fly around the property to see what was there, as well as find out how big it was. Harry found

a Quidditch pitch, stables, and even an empty swimming pool. Ron would be thrilled at the Quidditch pitch when he got here.

At the end of the day, he used his key to get back to Gringotts. There, he noticed he was in a slightly bigger vault now, and there were many crates of paper notes. Still, he was able to open the door, and ten minutes later a goblin in a cart showed up. Harry got a quick bite to eat in the Muggle world before taking the Knight Bus back to the park. It was beginning to become his normal routine.

During the ride, he wondered if he could put the Black pedestal at the Dursleys, then use that key to get there. On the other hand, Harry also considered he wouldn't be at the Dursleys much longer. Another problem: he was not sure how to get the pedestal there. He was reasonably sure he could shrink it down in the vault undetected, but he couldn't enlarge it at home without violating the stupid Underage Magic law.

Back at the Dursleys, Harry found a new letter from Hermione that some owl had dropped off. Reading it, Hermione told him multiple times Sirius' death was not his fault. She also said he should talk to someone to help him get better, as she knew he was sad at losing Sirius. Harry was sad about losing his godfather, but he was also too busy right now to dwell on it. Besides, Sirius wanted him to pull a big prank in honor of him, and that is sort of how Harry saw his plan: a big prank on Dumbledore. He laughed to himself about that. Harry would have been surprised if he could have heard how evil his laugh sounded.

Ron's letter was short and much the same, but in Ron's style. Harry figured those two had been talking to each other.

Ginny's letter was very different from the other two. While she also told him it was not his fault Sirius was no longer with him, she said she missed him too, though assuredly not as much as Harry did. Then she encouraged him to live for Sirius. That advice got him to thinking that he needed to search the library tomorrow for a book on becoming an Animagus. Sirius would find that funny and an honor. The rest of her letter went on about what was happening around the Weasley house. She was having a lot of fun with Ron and his



protective nature, telling him she was going out with Dean, though she just made it up on the train to get a rise out of her brother. That seemed very funny to Harry for some reason.

That made him think that maybe he was making a small mistake by trying to do everything alone. Living on his own was going to be a bit lonely, since he didn't have a family. Though Harry thought he could live with that, he also knew he was going to need information, inside information about what was going on. He really only had five people among his school friends to consider, the five that went with him to the Department of Mysteries. The question was: who was suited for his plans. He considered each one carefully, and ended up throwing out all the names but one. His final choice surprised him a bit.

He also considered that he really needed someone who was an adult too. Someone who could tell him about how the world worked, and hopefully tutor him as well. The library was great, but he could not talk to a book. His starting list here was much shorter, and his final choice of who to approach seemed reasonable, but he was unsure. Best to take care of his friend first, and the adult later.

Harry didn't need to write anyone for a couple of days, so he put that off and finished reading his Charms book. The most surprising thing he found was that he should be able to do spells in an Unplottable area and not get into trouble with the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Sorcery. Apparently, the Unplottable Charm was just strong enough to mask spell work. So from in there, he should be able to cast the Fidelius Charm around the house, and then he could cast seven more Fidelius Charms, all slightly overlapping, and hide the rest of the property. The only catch was that it would take several days, as he probably could only cast one or two a day due to how much magical power the Fidelius Charm took to cast.

He needed to have those hiding charms as Dumbledore probably knew where the Manor was. Nate had shown Harry how to set the security wards on the house, and Dumbledore was on the access list, or he had been at first. Harry removed everyone from the list but himself and the elves, so only the three of them could Floo or Apparate to the foyer, or go into the house uninvited. Now, the most

Dumbledore could do was to Apparate to the front gate, and knock on the front door. By tomorrow evening, that would be reduced to only finding the property. Harry went to bed early to get lots of rest for his work tomorrow.

(Wed 3 Jul)

Harry skipped the grudging breakfast his aunt offered him and keyed directly to the Manor with his books in hand. He first asked Winky for some breakfast. While she worked on that, he found a book on becoming an Animagus, and added that to his reading stack. Harry ate a quick breakfast, while also reviewing the Fidelius Charm one more time.

Fixing the boundaries of the house carefully in his mind, he started the long spell to hide the house. As he finished it, Harry felt a large drain on his magic, while he also felt a little something added to himself. According to the book, that meant he was successful. Before he collapsed, Harry went into the little dining area where he'd had breakfast, and one of the few areas that was now clean. Sitting down, he laid his head on the table and took a nap. Dobby woke him up a couple hours later when lunch was ready.

After a big lunch, Harry scoped out the area from the house to the front gate. With those boundaries in mind, he cast the Fidelius Charm again. Once more, he felt success, and now he was so tired he barely made it back inside the house. Napping for the rest of the afternoon and a hearty dinner gave him enough energy to return back to Privet Drive. Before he left, Harry tried a glamour to hide his scar, and that worked well. He wanted to see if he could hide in public by a means other than merely covering up. Tired but satisfied, he returned back to the Dursleys via his usual way.

From his experience today, Harry knew he'd only be able to do two of these charms a day. That meant he would need three more days before he could leave the Dursleys. That was longer than he wanted, but within acceptable time limits.

Knowing he needed to report in at least twice more, Harry started writing his letter. A two-liner to Lupin stated he was fine and that the

Dursleys were mostly ignoring him. He sent a slightly longer "I'm fine" letter to Hermione, and almost a duplicate to Ron. He doubted that would get them completely off his back about the subject of Sirius' death, but hopefully it would slow their diatribes down.

His letter to Ginny would take a lot more time. This he needed to word carefully, as well as to plan his actions well. Harry also realized he probably needed to be seen by his minders soon so they would think everything was normal. Deciding that washing Uncle Vernon's car was not too hard, and would allow him to plan while he worked, Harry went out front and did that in the last light of the day. It was not the best job he had ever done on the vehicle, but it was cleaner than when he had started.

Unfortunately, Uncle Vernon was not happy with that, and grabbed his arm when he came back in. "What did you do to my car, boy?" he said in his most menacing voice.

Harry shook himself out of his uncle's clutches. "Trying to keep up appearances. You do remember that there is always someone watching the house, right?" His uncle looked shocked. "So I need to be seen at least occasionally. Don't worry, I didn't do anything to your precious car except remove some dirt."

That calmed his uncle down a little, or at least he sounded calmer, though his face was still quite red. "When are you going to be out of here, boy?"

The word "boy", especially because of the way his uncle used it, had become Harry's least favorite word and set him on edge. "Probably Saturday night or Sunday morning. Don't worry. "I'll keep sending the I'm fine letters going until I leave, then I'll send them an I've moved letter when I'm gone." He really didn't plan to send the I've moved letter for quite some time, but it was not wise to say that out loud. When his uncle did not immediately say anything, Harry turned and left for his bedroom.

After another hour of careful thought, he had changed his mind on Ginny's letter, and made hers a very short one, but for a very different reason.

Even though it wasn't quite ten, Harry went to bed because he was so knackered from the spell work, and he had more to do tomorrow. He fell asleep thinking about his plan and all the problems he was going to cause Dumbledore; Sirius would be so proud of him.

A/N: Oh, I almost forgot to mention that this story is 20 chapters long. I'll post as fast as I can convert the story to a format that likes.

## Chapter 2: Where's Harry?

(Thu 4 Jul)

Even though Harry woke early, he felt reasonably normal. Checking the mirror, he saw his glamour from yesterday was still working. Donning his new dragon hide coat, he put his letters inside. Telling Hedwig to meet him at the park, Harry donned his Invisibility Cloak so he could slip out of the house undetected and meet up with his feathered friend. Once there, he collected Hedwig and coaxed her to ride on his shoulder. She did not like the Knight Bus ride to Diagon Alley.

Hedwig did seem to enjoy visiting the Owl Emporium, which helped to calm her down. Once Harry explained they were looking for an owl for a friend, and that he'd like her help in picking a good one, Hedwig was pretty normal. With his friend's help, Harry bought a cream coloured owl, a cage, and some treats.

Neither owl liked the bus ride to Ottery St. Catchpole. Harry was forced to bribe the birds with owl treats to keep them mostly quiet. The bus dropped them off a little ways outside the village, at the end of the very narrow dirt road that lead to The Burrow. After a good twenty-minute walk, Harry reached the paddock that was the makeshift Quidditch pitch for his best mate. There, he gave the letters to Hedwig, instructing her to deliver Ginny's first, then Ron's, before going on to Hermione. She gave a small hoot and took off for the house. Harry found a shady tree and sat down and waited.

Ginny was finishing breakfast as Hedwig came in and flew to her. That surprised her slightly, as she hadn't been expecting Harry to write back to her so soon, and honestly, maybe not even at all. She took both Weasley letters from the bird before Hedwig left. Laying Ron's down on the table so he could find it when he came down for breakfast, she opened hers.

Her mother came back into the room at that time. "Who's the letter from Ginny?"

"Harry. Ron's got one too. It says he's fine." She snorted at his usual answer for almost everything. Then she read the last line of his short note. Doing her best to keep a normal face, she said, "I'm going to go take a walk, Mum. I'll be back in a little bit."

"All right dear, but don't stay too long. I need you go get a few things from the store for me."

"Why don't you just give me the list and some Muggle money now? I can take my walk that direction," Ginny offered.

"Thank you, Ginny. Here, hold on." Her mum went over to a special jar that held a little Muggle money for those few food items that were easier to get from the local village. Handing her some money and the list, she told her daughter, "Please don't stay in town too long. I know how you like to look around, but be back by lunchtime. And be very careful dear."

"Yes, Mum." Ginny put her dishes up and headed out the back door. She preferred her faded jeans and a comfortable Muggle blouse for everyday wear, so she didn't have to go change to walk into town. Her wand was stuck under the waistband of her jeans and under her shirt. A bit inconvenient to get out in a hurry, but it was hidden and went with her -- just in case.

As she came to the paddock, Ginny stopped at the edge and looked around. Finally, she saw some motion off to the side. Harry was walking up to her with an owl in a cage. "Hi Harry, this is a real surprise. When I got your note that said to come to the paddock 'now' and to come alone, I sort of wondered if it was a Death Eater ruse, except that I recognized Hedwig." She wondered what he'd say, especially after what they'd both gone through about a week ago.

"I hope I didn't startle you Ginny, but I really needed to talk to you, and it needed to be face to face so no one else could intercept the note."

Ginny gave a small shrug. "OK, Harry. What did you want to talk about?" She had to admit he had her curiosity up, especially since she did not think he was supposed to be away from his relatives. The

unnamed owl in one hand and his Firebolt in the other only added to it. She also thought that maybe he had a coat that was made of dragon hide, or at least it looked like the same stuff the twins' vests were made of, but it was barely visible under his cloak so she wasn't sure. His next question increased her curiosity even more.

"Is there a little more private place we could talk? I really don't want Ron to come down here to do a bit of flying and find us. I want this to be just between you and me."

He did not seem to be nervous, she thought, which he usually was around girls, or at least while talking about boy/girl things, so she was at a loss as to what this was about. But she was definitely going to find out. "Yeah, follow me. I have a special little place I like to go to get away from everyone. It's a small clearing not too far from here. We'll be in shouting distance from the house, but as long as you don't talk too loud, no one will know we're there." She led him the clearing. Harry didn't seem to be talking, just watching the ground and probably gathering his thoughts. She was very interested in what he had to say.

In her little spot, they sat down on the sparse grass under a tree, facing each other; the owl and cage beside him. Ginny just looked at him and waited.

With a deep breath, he started, and his voice now had some nervousness in it. "Ginny, I'm about to do something and I need some special help. I'm hoping you will help me."

"Sure Harry, just ask."

"Just like that? You don't even know what I'm about to ask."

"Doesn't matter Harry." She kept her pleasant face on, though she was extremely curious as to what Harry was about to do. "I know you wouldn't ask me to do anything too bad, I trust you."

His eyes almost bugged out at that. "Are you serious? I mean, look what I dragged you into last week. You got hurt and I wouldn't be surprised if you got into trouble for it from your parents."

"My parents understood; they are in the Order, you know. OK, yeah, it took some explaining, but they were fine with it after a little yelling. And Harry? Don't forget that you didn't drag me into that. I went because I wanted to, even though you tried to make me stay."

Harry sighed. "I'm still very sorry you got hurt. Will you forgive me?"

Ginny smiled. "I thought I basically just said that; but if it makes you feel better, I forgive you Harry. Now, what is it you want?"

A small smile came to her friend. "Thanks, Ginny. Well, the first part is easy. How would you like an early birthday present?" He picked up the cage and set it in front of her.

"Harry? My birthday isn't until the 11th of August. And why would you give me an owl?"

"I need you to have an owl, Ginny, because I need someone to send me letters, give me information, and I can't use Hedwig because everyone knows her. But if you're writing people, and have your own owl, then no one would be any wiser." Harry still sounded a bit nervous, but seemed to be getting into this.

"And why do you need information? I don't think anything is being held from you, unlike last summer. Or is that what you're afraid of?"

Harry shook his head. "No, but I'm about to do something very, ah, extreme, and I'm going to need some very discreet help. Looking at the five of you that went with me, I think you're the best person to help me."

"Me?" She was quite surprised he would pick her. "Why me, Harry? Why not Ron or Hermione?"

"Look," he started explaining. "I don't know Luna well enough, so she's out. Neville would be a good candidate in about a year, as he's changed a lot recently, but I need someone now. I'm afraid that Hermione just might try to tell a professor what I'm doing, which



would defeat the entire purpose of what I'm planning. And I'd really like to have Ron help me, but I'm afraid he'd let something slip."

"Good points," she admitted, "though I'm not sure that Hermione would really let you down; but yeah, Ron is easy to make talk. He can't hold onto a secret to save his life."

Harry continued. "I need someone who will be loyal and hold the secrets, won't tell when pressured by an adult, can protect herself magically, is smart, and can be a good actress. Deviousness is also very helpful," he told her with a smirk.

"My my, be careful Harry, flattery might get you somewhere," she said teasingly. "So what are you going to do?"

He blushed slightly but continued on. "Do you promise on everything that's holy and dear to you, that you won't tell anyone, and that you'll help me as best you can? I don't want to get you into trouble, but I do need help. And given a little bit of time, I can offer you something in return for your trouble." He looked at her very seriously.

Ginny pulled out her wand and raised it. "I promise to keep your secrets Harry Potter, and help you to the best of my devious ability."

He chuckled at her small addition. "Very well. Ginny. I'm sick and tired of all the 'pain and suffering' as our Headmaster puts it. Most bothersome is the pain that he has caused me himself with his plans. So, I'm going to leave his plan, and start living my way." Her eyes went wide at hearing that. "Very soon, I will leave Privet Drive and never return. Unfortunately, the war will not leave me alone," he was not ready to share the Prophecy with her yet, "so I will live on my own, train on my own, and contribute to the war where I can. Obviously, I will need some help. Information and advice will be very important, that's where you come in. I've almost got a safe house set up to live in, and once I do that, I have to find a tutor I can trust, and I have an idea for that person already. Once I'm ready, I will start going after Death Eaters and Tom Riddle himself."

"Wow..." was all that came out of the stunned girl.

"My safe house will be ready in a couple of days, and I'll effectively disappear. The results should be hilarious; I think even Sirius would like it." Harry grinned at her as he thought about that, while ignoring the slight pain at the thought of his godfather.

Ginny laughed at him. "Oh Harry. That will be a prank that I will enjoy seeing. That will have a number of people running around as if searching for their knickers."

He chuckled at her turn of phrase. "I need a couple of weeks, then I can offer you something. I'll grant you access to my safe house, and if you ever need a place to go and stay, or even just escape for a few hours, you'll be welcome anytime. I'll even help you get there. And," he said grandly before going on, "you'll be able to do magic there before you're seventeen."

"Really?" He nodded. "Wow," she said again. "You got a deal Mr. Potter." Ginny stuck out her hand and Harry shook it. "So what's next?"

"I've got three days worth of work before I'm ready to move. So just sit tight until then. Or feel free to write me a letter, we can start that," he suggested.

"I can do that, but I would suggest we create an alias for you. That will make it easier. By the way, nice glamour to hide your scar," she complimented him.

"Thanks! Yeah, good idea. Got any old friends from when you were younger that moved away?"

"Oh, good idea. Wait, let me think." It was several seconds before her face lit up. "Yes. I went to a Muggle primary school for a few years to get the basics of reading and math, and there was a boy a couple of grades ahead of me named James York, whose family moved to Ireland. He was a bit skinny like you, but blond. Can you change your hair color?"

"Sure,"

"OK, do that. You know, if you could get rid of the glasses, that would really help to disguise you too." She looked thoughtful. "Yes, that should be enough, though you should probably also change your voice just slightly too. Oh, this is going to be so good to watch, I can hardly wait."

Harry grinned at her again. "So, an old friend has moved back into the area. Muggle born and recently heard you're a witch, and has decided to renew an old friendship?"

"Yeah, I think that will work."

"What about your joke on Ron with Dean? Is this in addition so you have two boys at once? Or will I be a replacement?"

She laughed. "I think that joke has about run its course, so this will be to replace that."

For some reason, Harry really liked that thought. "Well, that's all I've got for now."

"That's probably good. I'm supposed to heading into town, and not taking too long."

"Oh, I can help that with my broom. Say, what are you going to do about your new friend? You need to name him too."

Ginny smiled at the owl. "Hmm, how about ... Zeus? You look like you rule over all, the way you sit there looking around." The owl happily hooted. "Here, come on out you." She opened the cage and he hopped out and stood next to her on the ground. "You fly to the house over that way," she pointed, "and I'll be back in a little bit." Turning back to Harry, Ginny said, "I'll just leave the cage and treats here and retrieve them later."

"OK, here, hop on behind me and I'll give you a lift to the main road. That should make up most of the time we talked." Harry helped her up. She carefully climbed on behind him and wrapped her arms around his stomach. He felt a little jitter in his stomach as she did that.

There was something very nice about her sitting close to him. "Ready?"

"Any time, Harry." Ginny liked holding onto him. Talking to him and looking into his eyes had been very nice. He had not seemed self-conscious or anything. A tiny spark landed on her old crush and it started to smolder again.

Once he got out of the woods, Harry turned on the speed down the little driveway path to the main road. Ginny loved it and squeezed him tighter. He even flew a little ways towards the village, though he had to stop before he got there so Muggles would not see them flying. They dismounted the broom near the road behind some bushes.

"This is as far as I can take you, Ginny."

"Thanks Harry, that was very sweet of you. I'll make it back in good time, so I doubt anyone will know we've had our talk."

He smiled at her and put his right hand out on her shoulder. "Take care Ginny. I know you can protect yourself, but always be aware of what's around you. I don't want to lose ..." He couldn't say the rest.

Mimicking his action, she put her hand up on his shoulder. "What Harry? You can tell me."

His nervousness suddenly grew. "I -- I -- Just promise me you'll keep yourself safe. All right?"

Harry was staring into her eyes. As she returned his gaze, she began to feel the pull of those eyes. She loved his green eyes. Shaking herself mentally, Ginny refocused on what Harry had said. She had a good idea what he'd been trying to say, and she loved that too. "Sure Harry, I'll be safe for you. Take care of yourself, this is a big step in life." With a small smile, she turned and started walking towards the village.

After about a dozen steps, Ginny turned around and looked back over her shoulder. Harry was still standing there as she'd left him, except that he was glancing back and forth between his right hand and left

shoulder -- where he'd touched her and she'd touch him. She thought she knew what that meant, and the smoldering in her heart grew a little stronger. A half a minute later when she looked back again, he was gone. The Knight Bus had not come by, she would have known. That made her wonder not only how he'd left, but also how he'd gotten here in the first place. Harry was indeed a very special friend.  
(Sat 6 Jul)

Harry had come home very tired, but elated last night. He only had two more Fidelius Charms left, and he would do them today.

An unusual "Hoot" got his attention. Retrieving his glasses, he saw Zeus was there with a letter. Grinning, Harry got up and retrieved the letter from him. "Zeus, will you stay a little bit so I can send a letter back with you?" The owl gave a soft hoot and bobbed his head. "Thanks, Zeus." He went back to his bed and laid on it to read the letter.

Harry,

Thanks again for Zeus! He seems like the smartest owl in the whole world. You and Hedwig chose well.

All was not great when I got back home, though. I had some fancy explaining to do about how I got the owl. I hope you don't mind, but it was easiest, and probably best, that I told Mum you gave me the owl as an early birthday present, and had it fly to me with its cage. She went on and on about it, as you can probably imagine, but she eventually calmed down. The person I worry about is Ron. He keeps giving me looks every time the owl is brought up. Just thought I'd warn you. I think he's jealous because you never gave him an owl. I did point out to him that Sirius, your godfather, gave him an owl, and that's eased a lot of the tension.

Other than that, everything is normal here. I am looking forward to anything else that might happen this summer. I think your alter-ego is going to be very useful the more I think about it.

By the way, I think I will take you up on your offer when you are ready. We aren't being allowed to fly in the paddock this summer. I could

really use some flying time to keep me sane, you probably know what I mean -- you speed demon. That was really fun. If you think you can do it, I'd love for you to take me for a ride and do a real Wronski Feint.

Love, Ginny

Harry smiled to himself. He didn't know how Ginny did it, but she seemed to know how to make him smile. And he would take her on another broom ride.

Harry wasn't sure how to deal with Ron at the moment. He supposed just trying to be normal would be for the best. Perhaps a letter in a couple of days, when everything went crazy, would make him feel like he is in on something special. That would almost certainly be needed with Hermione, too.

Thinking about his "I'm fine" letter that was due today, he decided to skip it. That way the fun would begin soon, probably tomorrow.

Grabbing some parchment, he wrote a quick letter back. If she could write in code, so could he.

Ginny,

It's good to hear from you again. I should arrive later today. Be ready for fireworks tomorrow. Thanks for the warning about Ron. I'll see what I can do to help that. I accept your challenge: I'll be happy to show you the Feint up close and personal; I'll let you know when.

Your friend,  
James York

Taking the note to Zeus, Harry whispered to the owl while he tied the letter on. "Next time you need to find me, I won't be here, Zeus. I'll be at Potter Manor in Wales. You'll have to find me there. Can you do that?"

The owl hooted softly and rubbed his head on Harry's hand like Hedwig did. "You're a good owl. Here's one last treat for you, then

take that note to your mistress. Have a safe flight." The owl finished his treat and flew out.

Finding one more small piece of parchment, he wrote:

So long; farewell. I won't be back as this is no longer my home. HP

Putting that on his bed, he got dressed, got the last of his stuff together, checked the room one more time, and grabbed Hedwig's cage. His owl was already at the Manor. Taking out the Potter key, Harry transported himself to his new home.

Just two more Fidelius Charms and it would be "Home, Sweet Home."

(Sun 7 Jul)

Sunday evening, nearly fifteen witches and wizards met at a meeting for the Order of the Phoenix. During that time, their leader asked those keeping watch over Harry's house how it was going. All reported it to be calm, not a Death Eater in sight.

Remus Lupin used this opening to pose the question that had been bothering him. "Has anyone heard from Harry lately? I haven't received his usual I'm fine letter." He looked to Molly Weasley, as her children would be the normal ones who would hear from Harry.

"No Remus, no letters from Harry since Wednesday," the mother of seven replied.

He looked at Tonks, "Have you seen Harry outside recently?"

The girl with the pink hair didn't take long to answer. "Not since briefly Friday evening. He took out the trash, paused to look at the sunset, then went back in." No one had seen him Saturday or today.

"I think I need to go check on him tomorrow morning," Lupin said.

"I'm not sure that's wise," Dumbledore advised. "We don't need to unnecessarily upset the Dursleys. Let's wait a while longer, say 'til Wednesday."

Lupin didn't say anything, so the meeting went on, but he made plans to go tomorrow anyway. He felt more responsibility for Harry now that Sirius was gone.

(Mon 8 Jul)

Remus Lupin walked up to number four Privet Drive in his best Muggle clothes, which Petunia Dursley would have said were not worth much. She answered the door to see a man in a worn suit. "May I help you?"

"My name is Remus Lupin; I'm here to check on Harry."

Her pleasant smile turned into a scowl. "Harry has left for good. He and his kind are not ever welcome here again." She began to close the door in his face. Remus caught it, and pushed the door back open.

"Excuse me? I don't understand. What do you mean by 'Harry has left for good?'"

Petunia's scowl deepened as she realized his confusion could only mean that Harry had not sent his letter stating he'd moved. It was just like the worthless boy. "Just that. This is no long Harry's home. He has left for good. As far as we are concerned, he's no longer our responsibility, and he's not welcome back ever again." With that, she slammed the door.

Lupin was taken aback by that. It took nearly two full seconds for all her words and meaning to be processed, then he panicked. As fast as he could, Remus ran to Arabella Figg's house down the street and without knocking, opened her door and rushed to the fireplace. There, he made a Floo call to the Headmaster's office, as Mrs. Figg came into the room to see what the commotion was. Lupin ignored her questions.

"Albus! ALBUS!" he yelled.



The old man came over to his fireplace. "What seems to be the problem Remus?"

"Harry's gone, as in no longer at the Dursleys, or that's what Petunia claims."

Dumbledore immediately walked over to his table of little silver instruments to check one. After a bit of prodding with his wand, he was shocked that it showed no ward around Harry's house at all. He rushed back to the fireplace. "The blood ward is down. Go back and search the house. Get Harry out of there and to Headquarters. I'll send others over."

Lupin ran back to the Dursleys without a word to Mrs. Figg. His wand was out and he was searching for people in black robes and masks. Without hesitation, he used his wand to unlock the Dursley's front door and rushed in. Petunia screamed at his entrance.

"Where is he? I need to know where Harry is. His protection here is gone."

"I told you, he's gone. This is no longer his home." Petunia shrieked.

Exasperated with her answer, he ran upstairs and quickly found Harry's old room; but it was bare of Harry's things.

Running back down, he almost bowled Petunia over as she tried to hand him a small piece of parchment. "Maybe this will convince you."

Remus read the note and felt like he wanted to faint. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he ran out of the house to the area the watcher normally stood in. "Whoever's here, return to Headquarters immediately. Harry's gone."

"What?" came the voice of Tonks from under an Invisibility Cloak.

"He's gone, as in ran away. We have to start a search." He Apparated to the front door of Headquarters and went in. Tonks was right behind him.

Lupin Floo-called Dumbledore, who called an emergency meeting. Due to the time of day, only Remus, Tonks, Kingsley, Mad-Eye, Molly, and Albus were able to get there quickly. Lupin showed them all the note and relayed what Petunia had said. The werewolf thought most of the discussion was fruitless.

After Molly got over her initial panic, she asked, "How could he have run away?"

Mad-Eye chuckled. "Harry is a wizard and he has been trained in magic. So should we be overly surprised he was able to get away? There are several ways he could have left. After all, the guard wasn't really supposed to keep him there, just alert the Order if Death Eaters came. To keep him there, we would have had to have at least four people there at all times, including someone on the inside. The way it was, if Harry really wanted to leave, he could." Lupin agreed with Alastor's assessment, but it did not make him happy.

They did their best to create a list of places that Harry was likely to be, then they split the list to start searching for him. The more Lupin thought about Alastor's answer, the more concerned he grew.

Molly decided that the best thing for her to do was to go home to ask her children if they had heard from Harry today, as well as to search the area around The Burrow, in case he was camping in the woods. When she arrived, she immediately called out, "Ron, Ginny, please come down here right now!"

A moment later, footsteps thundered down. Her son was first. "What's up, Mum? Something wrong?" Her daughter then joined them.

"Have either of you heard from Harry today?"

Ginny thought her mother looked and sounded worried. "No, Mum; why?" Ron also said no, and Ginny noticed her mother did not answer her question, and her worry seemed to increase.

Suddenly, her mum exclaimed, "The clock!" She hurried over to look at it. They had added a hand for Harry last Christmas. All three of

them noted Harry's hand pointed to "Home". "Home? How can that be?"

Ginny thought it was blindingly obvious. The boy was where he thought of as home, but she didn't suggest this. "Mum, what's wrong with Harry? Something is obviously wrong." She was so thankful to Fred and George for her acting skills right now.

Molly deflated a bit and looked sad as she admitted, "Harry is missing. He's run away."

"What?!" Ron shouted. "That prat! What does he think he's doing? And why didn't he tell us?"

His mother did her best to calm him down by telling him what Professor Dumbledore had said, but she revealed more than she realized. Ginny picked up on the fact that Dumbledore was very worried about this. Ginny did her best to act very concerned, but otherwise, she casually watched everything around her. Yes, this is a grand prank Mr. Potter. Sirius would be very proud, she thought. Harry was spending the day reading at his new home. His need to survive motivated him to learn in a way that he had not in the past. In a small way, he thought he understood Hermione better. He had one major problem he needed to solve, now that he had a home.

The book he was reading seemed to answer most of what he needed. It explained Magical Theory, including how the Ministry tracked magic. According to the book, the method of tracking magic was actually much more imprecise than the Ministry let on. Magic was untraceable inside a Fidelius Charm, but he already knew that. It also said that as long as you only do a few spells, you won't be bothered in an Unplottable area. That mostly corresponded with the other book he'd read.

The tracking of magic, it said, was done with a combination of wand signature and a person's magical signature. Wand sellers are licensed and have to report each wand sold, and there is a spell they do on each person to record their signature, which is also turned in to the Ministry. That got Harry thinking back to Ollivander's shop and the

man's magical tape. The book concluded that it was very common for unsavory characters to have an unregistered wand, to do their magic.

Harry pondered all the information. As that would solve his problems on underage magic, Harry immediately wondered where to get another wand. Then it occurred to him that there might be some here. "Winky?" he called out.

The little elf popped in. "You called, Master Harry?"

"Winky, I believe you told me that when you cleaned out the master bedroom, that you found some personal items. Where did you put those?"

"I put them in the extra closet in the room, Sir. The closet with all the women's clothes you did not want but said not to throw out. They is in boxes there, Sir."

"Did you find any wands in your cleaning?"

"Oh yes, Sir. I found four of them, I did."

A smile came over Harry. "Thank you, Winky; carry on with whatever you were doing." He immediately went upstairs to the extra closet.

Unlike his closet, which was large and mostly empty because he had so few clothes, this one was packed. It had a large number of women's clothes, as well as about a half dozen boxes. He could not bear to throw out his mother's things just yet, and the practical side of him thought they might be useful someday, as he hoped he lived long enough to have a woman in the house. But that was so far in the future he mostly ignored the thought.

Pulling the boxes out, Harry went through them one by one. Most everything in here would be considered "sentimental", but he pushed it all aside for now. He had not worked up the mental courage to travel down that memory lane yet. Box number five held what he was looking for: four wands. Harry wondered whom they had belonged to, but he knew he would never know.

Waving each one, he got a decent amount of sparks out of two of them, one slightly more so than the other. Using the best, he tried a simple levitation spell on one of the boxes. The box went up and back down as commanded. It had taken a little more power and concentration to do it, but this wand would work for him. He was going to pretend it was his grandfather's. It was another fine day at Potter Manor.

(Tue 9 Jul)

Ginny was out in the back removing the weeds from the vegetable garden. Her mum liked a weed-free garden, though Ginny had never understood why. Most of the weeds were so small they did not bother anything. Still, it was her task, and had been for years. She was almost done when Zeus returned to her with a letter. She recognized Harry's scrawl as she read her name. She was going to have to mention that to him so he could disguise his writing, if he wanted to keep people from knowing the letters were from him. Opening it, she read:

Ginny,

I hope everything's going well there. Things are more than fine here.

That caused her to laugh. He must be in a really good mood.

The place won't be totally ready for nearly a month, but it's ready for close friends anytime. I'm trying to figure out the best way to help you come see me, please be patient for a few more days while I work out how.

In the meantime, I need a big, big favor from you. If you can't find a way to do this, I understand, it might be impossible for you to do.

Ginny smiled at that. Harry had accepted her challenge to take her on a Wronski Feint in his last letter, she supposed she should not be overly surprised he'd challenge her back. Well, she'd show him.

If you can, I need you to get Professor Lupin to your special spot Wednesday morning at 10. Tell him you need to talk to him or something, and it needs to be just him -- only him. If you must tell him

something to get him there, say it's a test to see if he trusts you, and he only gets one chance. I hope you don't have to tell him that. Maybe you can come up with a better excuse.

I hope to see you soon.

Your Friend,  
James

That's interesting, Ginny thought. She had to admit, it could be hard to get a hold of Lupin on such short notice. In fact, she didn't know where he lived or what his schedule was. On the other hand, it was only mid-afternoon, so if she hurried, Zeus could help her.

Ignoring the fact that she had not finished weeding, she sent her owl to her room and ran for the house.

"All finished dear?" her mother asked.

"I need to use the loo," Ginny threw over her shoulder as she ran through the kitchen and for the stairs. She heard her mum chuckling behind her. In her room, she grabbed some parchment, ink, and a quill, and headed for the bathroom. Locking the door, Ginny started writing.

Professor Lupin,

I know this is strange, but I had an idea for the search Mum said you were on. I don't want to put it in a letter, so could you please come by to see me Wednesday morning at 10. I'll trust you with this idea. Please trust me and come alone, totally alone.

Ginny Weasley

She really did have to go, so she used the toilet before she returned to her room to put her stuff up. Going to her owl, she attached the note. "Now Zeus, it's very important that Professor Remus Lupin get this note as soon as possible. I'm sorry I don't know where he is, but I trust you can find him." The owl hooted and affectionately nipped at

her finger. "Oh you are the clever one. Safe flight, boy." She watched him take off, before putting Harry's note in her desk drawer, the one with the lock to keep prying brothers, and hopefully mothers, out.

She left her room to finish her chores, and ran into Ron coming up the stairs. "Hey, who did you just send a letter to? I saw your owl go off."

Lifting an eyebrow at him in disdain, she replied, "You don't tell me who you send letters to, so I see no reason to tell you what friends I write to."

"It was to Dean, wasn't it?" he accused her.

A mischievous smile came over her. "So what if it was. What male friends I write to are none of your business. I don't ask you about every letter you get from Hermione, do I?"

He sputtered, "I, well, uh, ..."

"Then drop the protective brother role, Ron. None of my other brothers do it, and you shouldn't either. I can take care of myself and will," she told him with some heat. Pushing past him, she continued on, leaving him still gaping after her.

## Chapter 3: Rogue

(Wed 10 Jul)

It was close to nine in the morning, and time for Harry to be going. Better early than late for this, he thought.

Closing the book on Apparation, he walked to the Floo in the entryway, checking his appearance in the mirror one last time. Grabbing the new Floo Directory Dobby had bought for him, he double-checked his destination. Grabbing some Floo Powder, he tossed it in and said, "The Mad Hat". Stepping into the fire, he spun through the Network, and came out in a pub, which seemed to be the only public Floo in the area. It reminded him of the Hogs Head -- not the sort of place to bring a girl who didn't know how to take care of herself. The place seemed empty, except for the barkeep, who was setting up for that day's business.

"Pardon me," Harry said. "I needed to Floo to the area and this was the only public Floo I could find."

"That's because it is the only one in the area," the deep gruff voice told him, looking hard at him.

"Do you serve lunch here?"

"I do."

James York nodded in understanding. "Then perhaps I'll try some on the way back. Good day." He walked out liking his alias. It was good to be someone who didn't attract attention because of a scar. He still had his glasses, but his hair was almost as blond as Draco Malfoy's and it was also long enough to hang down to the top of his shoulders. He pulled it back like he'd see Bill Weasley do. Of course, the barkeep also could have been looking at him because of his coat. Harry thought he might have to put a spell on his dragon hide coat to disguise, though he doubted it would accept one.

As he walked outside, Harry pulled out his Firebolt, and returned it to normal size, making sure to use his grandfather's wand and not his. A



Disillusionment Charm on himself and his broom, and he was ready to fly to The Burrow.

During his trip, Harry mused on some of the things he'd found in his library over the last few days. Besides learning how to do magic without getting into trouble, he's also found one on Wizarding customs. He now understood why Bill, the Malfoys, and a few others wore their hair longer. It was the old custom of showing the head of a house, or in Draco and Bill's cases, the heir of a Wizard house. It was sort of nice to have a different look, and it also made his hair lay flatter, which he liked.

Another find had been a book on Metamorphmagi and Changelings. Harry had determined he wasn't one, at least not like Tonks was, but he did seem to have some small control on the hair on his head. It was not totally conscious, but he could make his hair grow really fast, like he'd also been able to make it not grow at all over most of his life. Over the last two days, it had grown the extra eight inches he had now. As this was where he wanted it, he thought about it staying this length, and it had not grown any more.

Harry could see The Burrow in the distance, so he angled for it. By the time he reached Ginny's special place, it was half past nine. He removed the Glamour Charms on himself to look more recognizable before he shrunk his broom and put it back into his pocket. That done, he sat down to wait, still Disillusioned.

At ten o'clock sharp, the Weasley fireplace belched out Remus Lupin. Ginny thought he looked a bit haggard. She knew the full moon was getting near, but she wasn't sure if that was it, or a missing Harry was the problem -- or maybe both.

"Remus! This is a surprise," Molly told him as she came over to greet him. "What brings you here?"

"Hello, Molly. I was hoping to have a conversation with your children. I thought that maybe one of them might have an idea on how to find Harry."

"I can't believe he's still missing, the poor boy. Are you sure he hasn't been taken? I mean, he was with those awful Muggles. Maybe they turned him over to..." She seemed unable to go on.

"Not according to Severus," the werewolf assured the mother. "Perhaps I should speak to Ginny first."

"I can't imagine how she could help, but if you think talking to her can help, by all means. We need to find that boy."

It took all of her will power not to roll her eyes at her mother for thinking she was useless. "Professor Lupin, would you like to talk outside? It's a nice day and I'd like to hear what you have to say." Ginny hoped he would continue on with his act. He'd done brilliantly so far.

"Yes, good idea Ginny. A stroll around the back garden would be nice. Shall we?" He gestured for her to precede him and they walked out. Once outside from the door a little bit, he casually asked, "So what did you want to talk about, Ginny?"

She led him towards the woods. "Actually, I think you have the correct topic. How is the search coming?"

He frowned a bit, as he did not really want the small talk right now, he wanted information. "Not well. We've checked all the obvious places and have found no sign. Some very discreet questions have also yielded nothing, but it's hard to ask, as we don't want to advertise that Harry is missing."

"I see. So I guess it's the unusual places you have to search now."

"Actually, I don't know where to search. I was really hoping he would confide in one of us before he did something rash. Did he tell you, Ginny? Is that what you want to talk about?" Remus was losing his patience from his mounting frustration.

As they walked into the small clearing, Remus heard a voice and saw a new person suddenly appear. "She's not the one who really wants to talk to you, Moony." It sounded like Harry, and mostly looked like

him, but he now had long hair that was pulled back, and no scar was visible on his forehead. He also had a wand trained on the werewolf.

Ginny looked at her friend and gulped. She'd always liked his short messy black hair, but then she'd also always liked Bill's longer hair. To see the longer look on Harry was something else. Either style would do for her, but she suddenly wanted to run her fingers through his hair. And now that she got a good look at the coat he was wearing, she thought it had to be dragon hide. As the twins would say, he was spiffing, and then some, she thought.

"Harry?"

"Yes, Moony. You don't mind if I use your old name, do you?" Harry waved his wand around the area and cast an Imperturbable Charm for privacy.

The older man shook his head, still somewhat in shock at finally finding the boy. Yet, he didn't look like much of a boy any more for some reason. The hair helped, but it was also his stance, the way he looked. Remus suddenly realized it was also the confidence he was displaying. "I haven't been a professor for some time now," he finally got out.

"I hope you'll forgive me, but -- Accio Wand!" Remus' wand went flying to Harry. "You know what Mad-Eye says." He grinned to try to take some of the sting off. "Have a seat please." Harry conjured three chairs for them all.

"Harry, are you trying get into trouble?"

"Not at all. Believe it or not, I'm trying very hard to stay out of trouble. I'll admit that I'm having to bend a few rules, rules which are pretty stupid, but I am doing my best to avoid problems." Harry seemed so matter-of-fact about it all.

"So what is this all about Harry? You must have run away, since you are on your own. Or are you under the Imperius Curse?" Lupin was trying to think hard, and nothing made sense to him.

Laughter escaped Harry. Ginny smiled at that too. "No, Moony. In case you didn't know, I can throw off the Imperius Curse. Voldemort tried it on me, too. Didn't work for him, either."

Either? Lupin thought. He wondered how many people and who had tried to control Harry. "So why did you run away, Harry?"

"Why? Because I'm tired of the way things are." A hard edge had suddenly come into Harry's voice. His eyes flashed dangerously. "You may not realize how bloody messed up things are with me, but from my point of view, I don't like what I see and I've decided to do something about it. The first step was moving out to be on my own."

"Harry! Do you realize how dangerous that is?" Harry laughed again, and Remus started to wonder if the boy had gone over the edge.

"Sorry, but that's a good one. You do realize who you're asking, right?" Remus only sat there and stared. "Look Moony, the reason I wanted to talk to you is because I do know that I can't be one hundred percent alone; I do need some close trusted friends."

Remus breathed a sigh of relief and wondered what deity he should thank for Harry coming to that realization. "I take it Ginny is one?"

"Yes, Ginny is the first." That gave Remus pause; he would have suspected Ron to be in on it too. Harry must have picked up on the werewolf's confusion, because he answered the unspoken question. "Those in my closest circle of friends need very special qualifications. Ginny has them; my other very good friends do not, at least not yet. I know I will face some minor difficulties because of this, but that is the situation I am in now."

Harry knew Ron and Hermione's reaction were going to be worse than just minor difficulties, but he had already begun to plan on how remedy this. Pushing thoughts of his best friends back for the moment, he reached the main purpose for this meeting.

"Moony, I'd like to add you to my closest circle. The questions are: Do you want to be there and can I trust you?"

Remus paused for a moment to study the young man. "Yes to both Harry. I'm surprised you have to ask." He was a bit hurt by the questions. He wasn't Harry's godfather like Sirius had been, but that was how he thought of himself now.

"I knew you would want to be," Harry smiled at him. "The other question isn't as simple. You see, the reason I've had to make such a big deal out of all this is because the person most responsible for the big decisions, the things that have hurt me the most, has never consulted me about them. He also rarely explains why he does what he does. The result has been pain and suffering far beyond what I think it should have been. This is no longer acceptable. I will no longer be someone else's tool."

Lupin paled at hearing that. That kind of accusation was astounding.

"So while I respect Albus Dumbledore greatly, as he is a man of great knowledge, and I'm quite sure he does want Voldemort dead, which puts us on the same side of the war, I firmly believe he does not have my best interests at heart. So Moony, do you understand the real question now? Can you play two parts in the war? Can you help me and put me and my needs above what Albus Dumbledore wishes? Can you hide me and help me become ready to do my part in the war? Because I have a part which must be played, otherwise, we'd never be having this meeting as I'd already be in Australia, or maybe in America or Canada."

Moony's head felt like it wanted to burst from hearing all of that. He was having to think very hard. This was James and Lily's son making these claims and, honestly, ultimatums. How did he feel about that and what should he do?

Harry saw confusion and questioning on Moony's face, so Harry left him alone to think it through. He looked at Ginny and saw amazement on hers, and frankly, some fear. He gave her a questioning look.

"Would you really leave the country, Harry?" she asked in a small voice.

"If circumstances were different, I think, yes, I would leave for a few years. I'd finish school somewhere else and then come back and try to live a quiet life. But I can't do that, the circumstances won't allow it," he told her gently. Checking the other person, it seemed Remus was still struggling with his thoughts. "Also, I have some friends here I don't want to leave," he smiled at her. "They would make it very difficult to go, unless I took them with me, which is next to impossible."

Ginny's breath caught at that. Surely he didn't mean what she thought he did. He must mean all his close friends, not just her. She tried to bury her crush again and hoped he hadn't seen it on her face. She watched his gentle smile leave her and turn back to their old professor; her feelings seemed to be safely hidden.

Harry's full attention returned to his former professor. "Well Moony, what choice do you want to make?"

The werewolf had trouble talking as he seemed to mouth words, but nothing came out. Stopping to clear his throat, he tried again. "Harry, that is difficult. It's very hard to decide quickly."

"I'm sorry Moony, but you need to decide before we part. If it will help you, I'll share a few of the items on my 'Grievance List' as I think of it." The man nodded. "OK, the old man knows the Prophecy and told my parents, which is why they went into hiding."

"I know he told them something special, I was there with them when they moved."

"Yeah, but Moony? Did you ever stop to ask why Dumbledore didn't look for spies in your midst then, and maybe advise them to check their secret keeper for a Dark Mark?" Lupin's mouth opened slightly and didn't close. "Or why other than you and a Death Eater, he hasn't hired any competent Defense teachers, when he knows how important it is for all of us because there is a war going on? Or has he told you that he is to blame for me going to the Department of Mysteries and for Sirius dying? I do appreciate him owning up to that, but I would have preferred he have prevented it by sharing a few things sooner. After all, everyone says he's the 'Greatest Wizard of

the Age'. And let's not forget all the literal pain and suffering I went through as a child, and still have done every summer when I have come home on summer break, because he placed me with the Dursleys. All because it was more important that I was safe than for me to be loved and well cared for."

Remus just stared.

"Let's face it, Moony, I know you've had a hard life, but of the three of us, I know the least about love. Yet, according to the 'Greatest Wizard of the Age', love is supposed to be one of my weapons against Voldemort. Now, how in the bloody hell am I supposed to use a weapon I have no clue about? You can ask Ginny how clueless I am. She can probably give you countless examples of girls at school who like me, and flirt with me, and unless they have a sign on their forehead, I don't even know they're doing it or what they're up to."

Ginny was mortified to hear that. Her feelings were being slammed to the ground and trampled on. She started to tell him what he could do with his cluelessness, when he continued on, tears starting to well in his eyes.

Now anguish entered his voice. "And I see a normal family with parents and lots of children, who love each other, and I'd give everything I have to be a part of it so I could love too. To have a brother or a sister to love me, and to love back. A family that doesn't starve you because you got a good grade; or beat you because you accidentally cut your finger and dripped blood on the floor." He briefly paused as bitterness crossed his face and came into his voice. "The closest thing I know about love comes from a nightmare, where I hear my mum scream just before she dies for me." Harry's head fell as his tears started flowing freely.

Ginny's biting words stuck in her throat. She suddenly realized what it was like to be Harry Potter. He did have a reason for being clueless around girls, for ignoring her. With some fear as to what his reaction might be, she slowly reached out and placed her hand on his hand. As he looked up at her, she wanted to say "I'm sorry", but the look on his face told her that would be the wrong thing to say. So she settled on, "I never knew." When he only blinked, she felt emboldened to add,

"You can be a part of our family Harry. Surely you know Mum already thinks of you that way."

He sniffled once as he looked into her brown eyes. "Thank you Ginny," he softly told her. "Your house is the only place I feel like I'm home with a real family."

Remus interrupted them. "So what do you want me to do, Harry?"

After another moment, control came back to Harry's face and voice. "I need someone who's been in the world and understands what it's like out there to help guide me. I don't want a parent; I'm too old to be a child. I want a mentor. I also need a teacher. I know I've got a lot to learn and the faster the better. The war has been too defensive on our side, it needs to be more offensive, and I plan to help that. I'll pay you well Moony, as it will be your full time job for the next year. No more part-time stints for you. But most of all, I need your trust and your friendship, because those are what will allow you to keep my secrets as you help me. Are you willing to be that mentor?"

"I can do that, though you don't need to worry about the pay. I can do other things for money," the werewolf argued.

"Sure you can, but I'm not going to let you. Tutoring me will be a full-time job. I mean eight to ten hour days, five days a week, for the next year. Tell me what you think is fair, or at the very least what Hogwarts paid you. Since you know my family's history, you know money is not an issue here."

"You mean until school starts," the man tried to correct him.

"No, I do mean for the next year. I don't plan to return to Hogwarts until the war is over." He got two very surprised looks. "Think about it, a lot of stuff that we study there won't help me in a war. I don't need to write essays, I just need to learn the practical side of things. And Quidditch is the best sport on the planet, but I can already fly and the game isn't going to kill a single Death Eater. I will take some time off occasionally, because all work and no fun makes Jack a dull boy, or I think the saying is something like that. But I'm very serious about this.



Also, going back to school would put me under the authority of Dumbledore, and I don't want that, nor can I afford that now."

"All right Harry, you've got yourself a deal."

"I must ask you for one more thing since you're willing so far. While I believe I can trust you, and that you have my best interest at heart, there is a difference between trust and absolute trust. I need absolute trust, and I need it immediately." Harry looked deadly serious.

"I'll swear any oath you want Harry."

"Excellent, because I want an Unbreakable Vow to hold my secrets until I release you from it. This is that serious to me."

Lupin looked at the young man, trying to judge him one last time. Harry, the son of James, passed. "Very well, Harry." He stuck out his hand and Harry performed the spell. Lupin swore to protect Harry's secrets and to work in Harry's best interest until released.

As the bands of magic faded away, Harry smiled. "Just for a while Moony, I promise." Then looking back and forth between the two, he asked, "So, anyone want to come see my humble abode?"

Two large grins gave him their answer. He reached into his robes and pulled out a small slip of paper and showed it to them. They knew the drill.

"Potter Manor?" Ginny asked.

"How did you find out about it?" Remus asked. "James took me there a few times by Floo, but I never really knew where it was."

"I found out about it accidentally from the goblins at Gringotts. Did you know I should have learned about it and my family vault nearly a year ago? Yet another thing Dumbledore thought I didn't need to know. He's so damn good about not telling me things." Harry torched the paper before he took down the privacy charm and Vanished the chairs. Handing Remus' wand back to him, he told them both, "Grab

onto my upper arm." Ginny took his right and Remus his left. Pulling out his key, he touched his wand to it and they left for Wales.

They landed in the newly cleaned foyer. While Ginny glanced around in awe, Remus simply stood there, remembering. "This way," Harry told them as he led them into the house. He did the quick tour, which still took half an hour. Both of them fell in love with the library, though in Remus' case, it was a remembered love from when James had brought him here.

"Remus? We still have one thing to discuss," Harry told the man as they left the Dueling Room. "Your salary. What's it going to be?"

"I don't know Harry. They paid me twelve thousand Galleons for the year at Hogwarts. That's the most I've ever been paid," the werewolf admitted.

"Very well. I'm not offering room and board like the school did, though you are welcome to any meal here you want. So let's double that. You will want to have your own place to live, so you can get away from me from time to time if nothing else." Ginny giggled.

"Harry! I can't take that much from you."

"Moony, you can and will. I promise you, I will make you earn it. By the way, here's something from Sirius for you." He handed the bank draft over. "Get yourself some new clothes, have a nice rare steak, whatever you want just for you. I'm sure Sirius would want that."

Lupin stared at the bank draft for several very long seconds, before slowly putting it away. "Thank you Harry, I think I will change my wardrobe. Maybe even get a coat like yours, if I can find one in my size."

"The shoppe in Diagon Alley had several more if you're serious."

"Maybe. Where was that bathroom, I can't remember, and I need to visit it before we leave."

Harry smiled and pointed, "Down that hall."

As the man left, Ginny turned to her friend. "This is quite a place Harry."

"There's more, including a Quidditch pitch. When you have time, I'll show you."

"I'd like that. You know Harry, with your longer hair, and that coat, you look really different," she told him.

"Oh? Bad different or good different?"

"Just different," then she giggled. "Maybe like a pirate." He raised his eyebrows at that. "No," she changed her mind, "not a pirate, you'd need an eye patch for that. A rogue -- yes, a wild, rough, brazen man, someone who walks a different path sort of a person and likes it. That's what you are, Harry Potter -- Rogue."

Harry considered her. She seemed to be only slightly teasing; it was so hard to tell what she meant by it. "OK, a rogue. I can handle that. So, do you like me being a rogue?" He watched her consider the question.

"Yes, I think it fits you well, especially with the new way you're approaching life. It also gives you an air of mystery, something women like."

He studied her more carefully, trying to decide what to do about her and her comment, but then Remus walked back in. "Thanks Harry. Well, Ginny, I guess we checked this lead out and came up empty. I'll tell Molly it was a good try."

They all walked back to the foyer. "If either of you need to get here by Floo, you are now the only other names on the access list. Say 'Potter Manor in Wales' and you'll get here, though please be damn careful no one can hear you announce your destination. Even if they can't get here, I'd prefer my location be unknown for as long as possible. Moony, you can also Apparate into the foyer here. I'll see you here at nine on Monday."

The former professor looked at Ginny. "If you'll grab my arm, I'll Apparate both of us back to the spot we came from." He looked at Harry one last time. "Thanks for giving me this chance, Harry."

"You are the last of my parents' true friends and deserve it," Harry told the man. Remus nodded and left with Ginny.

Arriving back near The Burrow, they walked up to the house. "There you two are," Molly exclaimed, "I was started to get worried about you, even if your hand did point to Home, Ginny. I don't know why it briefly went to traveling."

"Sorry Molly," Remus apologized. "We did leave for a very brief moment to check out one place Ginny suggested, but there were no signs Harry was there either."

In talking to Ron, Lupin found the boy had no ideas at all, and seem very put out that his best mate would do this and not tell him. Remus tried his best to comfort him with "He must have a very good reason," before he left.

(Mon 15 Jul)

At nine o'clock sharp, Remus Lupin Apparated into the foyer of Potter Manor. He felt mostly normal, at least as long as he considered it was only the second morning after a full moon. In many ways, he felt better now than he had in many months, thanks to Harry and Sirius. With the gift, he had been able to buy the Wolfsbane potion. That eased his discomfort considerably.

Walking into the Manor, he found his new student finishing breakfast and reading a letter.

"Good morning Harry. Doing well today?"

A smiling Harry Potter looked up. "Fabulous." He folded the letter and put it into a pocket. "If you'll hold on just a minute, I'll be right with you."

Remus watched him walk over to the owl perch, which had both Harry's snow-white owl, and solid cream-colored owl, who was about the same size as Hedwig. "Zeus, why don't you stay here and rest for the day. I'll send you back tonight. All right?" The owl hooted. Harry turned and saw his teacher watching. "Ready?" Harry asked him.

Remus smiled at the lad. "I am. Who does the other owl belong to? No, wait, don't tell me -- Ginny." The boy smiled and then walked past him and headed towards the library. "That's very smart of you Harry. You've put some planning into your actions, haven't you?"

They entered a now clean library. "I do try, Moony. I do try. Well, I assume we can study in here, and we have the Dueling Room for spell work which is more dangerous. There's also all of outdoors if we need more space. Oh, and there's a Potions Lab in the basement."

"You're very well situated here. Let's talk about what you want to cover. I can make guesses, but I think everyone will be happier if we have specific goals." As Lupin was hired, he looked to Harry.

"Well, there's the obvious, like Defense." After a pause, Harry added, "Offensive spells would be good to know too," he joked. Harry continued a bit more seriously, "Charms and Transfiguration will play prominent roles. I don't think I need much of any of the other subjects except for some Potions. Any creature work that I really need probably falls in the theory part of Defense. I suppose Ancient Runes could be useful in research, but I'd like to skip that personally and hand that work out to someone else who can help me."

"All right, Harry. That makes sense. I can help you with most of that. I agree that Ancient Runes is helpful overall, but you don't need it. I, or Hermione, can help you with that if needed. You probably won't need to decipher Runes in the middle of a battle." The two smiled at each other at that thought. "The only problem I see is Potions. I've never been very good at it. In fact, I didn't pursue it past my OWL year."

"Hmm," Harry thought about that. "Hermione would be my first choice to help me, but she will be at school. I need someone who has a good grasp on it." He paused to think. After a moment, he smiled.

"Actually, there are two someones who are quite good at potions work, though I don't think it would be safe to bring them here."

Remus laughed. "Yes, good idea Harry. Perhaps you could convince the twins to teach you at their shoppe in the evening?"

"Yeah, good idea. I'll talk to them about that when I'm ready. I want to get better with my spell work before I spend a lot of time away from here."

"Good idea, Harry." Remus was quite relieved at how safety conscious Harry was being. Perhaps Mad-Eye had rubbed off on the boy more than Remus had first thought.

"But Moony? The first things I want to learn are survival related. I want to start the process of learning how to be an Animagus, and I want to learn to Apparate. I have Gryffindor courage, but the Slytherins are correct that sometimes, it is better to run away so you can fight another day."

The old Marauder laughed. "Good point Harry. Very well, let's start with those two things first. I'm not an Animagus, but James and Sirius did explain it to me. We need to start with the Revealer Spell to see if you have it in you, and what you will end up being."

"I know, I've already started reading a book on it. I've done the spell, so we can start after that."

"Oh? And what did you see?" Lupin was curious, and he was impressed Harry had already done that spell, as it was complicated.

Harry smirked. "That's my secret for now, but let's say that there is a reason I fly so well."

Lupin laughed. "All right, Harry. Let's start on Apparation then, since I already know that. I'll read about Animagi tonight and we'll start on that tomorrow." Harry looked pleased. "Right, so to Apparate, it is extremely important to remember the three D's of Apparation: Destination, Determination, and Deliberation."

The teacher conjured a lime green rug about a yard in diameter, and placed the edge of it a yard in front of Harry. The rest of the morning was spent on the lesson.

After a plate of sandwiches for lunch, the afternoon was spent in the Dueling Room. Moony tested Harry on various spells, as well as a few quick duels. He was very impressed with what Harry had learned in the two years since Moony had been his professor.

Lupin was about to leave a tired boy as the day's lessons ended, when he was asked an unexpected question. "Moony, do you remember the mirrors Sirius and my father had to talk to one another?"

"Yes, Harry. In fact, I thought Sirius gave you one."

Harry looked down in sadness. "He did, but I broke it." After a deep breath, he looked back up to his teacher. "Could you get me another pair? Or better, teach me to make them?"

Remus looked at him and understood that Harry was finally coming to terms with the loneliness of the big house and his self-imposed exile. "I can Harry. How about tomorrow afternoon? I'd like to continue on Apparation tomorrow morning. You managed to flicker, so I'd like to continue your progress there."

"Thanks Moony, I really appreciate it."

"No problem Harry. Not only do I want to help you, but well," he smiled to have some fun, "it is my job."

Harry laughed. "Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow morning then." The teacher left, and Harry was alone again, except for his two house elves.

After dinner, he sat in front of the small fire in the library and started writing Ginny. He had so much to tell her about his day. He'd send Zeus off with it when he was done so she'd have it first thing in the morning.

(Thu 18 Jul)

Before Harry went to bed that evening, he took four letters to Hedwig. "Hi girl. Are you ready for some exercise?" She hooted and bobbed her head. "Good. These shouldn't be too hard though. These three all go to the Weasleys. And this one goes to Hermione. If you want to rest there, go ahead. She may have something to send back to me later. If you'll wait just a minute, Zeus can fly with you for part of the trip."

He tied a fifth note onto Zeus' leg. "Zeus, be sure you give this to Ginny in her room. It's for her only, OK?" Zeus hooted and took off, Hedwig followed.

Harry lay down on his bed. He was not as tired as he had been earlier in the week, he supposed he was starting to get used to his new schedule. Moony had promised that tomorrow they'd work on the Animagus changing for an hour, and then spend the rest of the day on some new Offensive spells. He did his best to clear his mind to get a good nights rest. Occlumency was something else he was going to have to address soon.

(Fri 19 Jul)

The two remaining Weasley children were having breakfast while their mother was cleaning up in the kitchen. Ron was the first to notice a snowy white owl about to fly through the open window. "Blimey! It's Hedwig!" To his consternation, the owl flew to Ginny, but it was obvious there were lots of letters tied to her. "Well, who are they for?" he demanded.

"Patience Ron," his sister scolded him. "There's one for Hermione, so Hedwig won't be staying. Here's one for you, one for me... Oh! And one for mum and dad. Mum! Letter from Harry for you!"

She watched her mother excitedly rush in and grab the letter. Looking over, she saw Ron was already reading his. The fact that he was not exploding was good she thought. She continued to watch them as she slowly opened her letter. It was quite short. It told of a few things he'd been learning, as well as told her to not worry about him. A pretty boring letter really, not typical for Harry at all. Then a thought



occurred to her and she understood, he thought the others might read this. Zeus should have returned this morning, and she had not seen him. Perhaps she had another letter, but it would have to wait.

Her mum sighed and looked almost happy for the first time since Harry's disappearance. When her mum looked at her, she offered her letter up, and they swapped. This letter was much longer.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Weasley,

I want you to know that I'm very safe. No one will be able to find me unless I want them to. I suspect that if we were to talk right now, you would tell me you were upset with me for running away. For that, I'm very sorry, as it was not my intent to have caused you grief. Please understand that this is something I had to do. I know I'm not seventeen yet, but I am growing up. It's becoming time to do some things my way. It may be useless to ask, but please don't worry about me. I will continue to be in hiding for some time.

My main goal for now is training. Some day, I will come out of hiding, and I know I need to be able to protect myself. This is more of my "Safety First" motto, along with Mad-Eye's "Constant Vigilance".

Yes, I am eating well. Please don't worry about that. The food may not be quite as good as yours, Mrs. Weasley, but I am eating as well as I would at school.

I don't know when I will see you next. Please be assured that I miss everyone there greatly. I think of you as my family, and I miss my family. But I have good reasons, and I will return when I'm able at some future time so I won't put anyone there in danger. Please don't plan a birthday party for me; I can guarantee I won't be there that day.

Take care,  
Harry Potter

p.s. If you can, please contact Professor McGonagall and have my OWL scores sent to your house -- thanks!

Ginny smiled. Harry had done that well. She wondered how long, and how many revisions, it had taken him. Looking up, she saw Ron had a very thoughtful look on his face. Holding up her mum's letter to him, he held out his and they swapped.

Dear Ron,

I hope you are doing well; I am. This has been one of my best summers ever, no Dursleys!

That being said, there is a bad side to the summer, my time to come visit you is going to be very minimal. I'm very sorry about that mate. Knowing you like I do, I suspect you're probably angry with me for not telling you I was going to do something like this. I'm sorry, but sometimes, a person has to do what they have to do, and I needed to do this myself to prove that I could. I hope you can understand that. You're already sixteen, so I hope so.

We'll talk before school starts. I don't know when that will be. I only leave my hiding spot at random times, and generally not for very long. I'm not ready to be seen yet; I'm sure you understand. **CONSTANT VIGILANCE!**

Don't worry, you're still my best mate. I'll even let you beat me in Wizard's chess.

Take care,  
Harry

Ginny smiled. Yes, Harry had worked hard on this one too. She suspected Ron would feel much better. She would have to talk to Hermione later and see what her letter was like. The information was a little different in each, but about the same overall. He was not giving much away.

When their mother left the room a few minutes later, Ron turned to his sister. "Ginny? Why do you think Harry ran away?"

"I think the letter to Mum said it best. He's growing up."

"Yeah, I suppose. But do you think there's more to it?" Ron looked like he was searching for the right chess move.

"Probably, Ron, but I don't think Harry is going to put it in a letter. We'll just have to wait until he visits us." She looked at her brother who went silent after that. He remained very thoughtful for the rest of the day.

When Ginny went back upstairs, she did find Zeus in her room, and he had a letter. Closing her door, she quickly opened her other letter.

Dear Ginny,

Thanks for the observations on everyone's mood. You were right (again). But then I knew I needed help and that's why you're one of my advisors. If you haven't seen them yet, I sent letters to your family. Please let me know if they help everyone feel better about what I've done. I didn't apologize for what I did, but I do feel badly that some might think I don't care about them when I do.

I'm keeping this short because I have a surprise for you. Take a walk tonight at 7. You know where to go.

Take very good care,  
Harry

She quietly laughed. She had predicted what Hermione would say to him, and apparently she had been correct. Hopefully, Harry had used that information to his advantage in his letter to their friend.

Ginny guessed he was going to come see her this evening. She wondered what the surprise was.

It was a few minutes after seven when they finished dinner. As quickly as she could without arousing suspicion, Ginny left out the back door. A glance behind her showed no one following her, so she went down the path to her little clearing. When she got there, she found her rogue-looking friend. "Harry!" Without thinking, she ran to him and gave him a hug.

Harry was not sure what to make of the hug. He'd seen her less than a week ago. Still, it did feel nice, so he slowly wrapped his arms around her to return it. As he did, he heard loud footsteps coming through the woods. "Hold on to me tightly," he whispered to her. Closing his eyes, he thought about the foyer to the Manor and touched the wand on his forearm. With a faint crack, he opened his eyes to see the foyer of his house.

"Oh my! What just happened? Harry, how did we get to your house?"

"Surprise Ginny. Actually, sorry about that. I heard someone coming and didn't want them to find me there. I suspect Ron followed you. Hold on, I'll take you back to a different spot." Thinking carefully, he pictured the paddock in his mind. A few seconds later, they were there. "Perhaps we should find another place as he might come here too." Harry finally let her go, and when he did, he felt a loss. He did not realize how good it felt to hold her.

Ginny felt a bit sad to let go of him as well, it had felt really good in his arms. Perhaps she could find another way to get him to hold her. "This way," she suggested and led him towards the pond. "That's a pretty neat trick, Harry. I take it you just learned?"

He smiled broadly. "Yeah, I did the equivalent of the Apparation Licensing test yesterday. So Moony says I can if I need to. He probably wouldn't be too thrilled about me coming here, but it's for a good cause."

"I do like seeing and talking to you, but why is it a good cause?" She looked at him and again she had a sudden urge to run her fingers through his hair.

"Because I brought you a present, Ginny." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a hand mirror that was about four inches across. "Say my name when holding it, and my mirror will vibrate. When I answer, we can talk."

"Wow! This will be nice."

"I like writing to you Ginny, and I won't stop as sometimes things are easier in a letter. But sometimes, it's nice to talk to a person too."

She smiled at him, and the smoldering in heart grew a little more. "Thanks Harry. This makes me feel special." She saw his hand twitch, as if it wanted to move, but he kept it to himself.

"You are special Ginny. You part of my closest circle of friends, and you're also the guardian for your family now. That mirror is more than for us to talk. It's also for you to call me if something happens. If something bad happens, I expect you to call me immediately, and I'll be there." He was very serious.

"But Harry..."

"Ginny, you're family. You told me so, and I take that very seriously. Family does this for each other. I know you can protect yourself; you're that kind of person. But there are times life hands you a bad deal that's too big for one person to handle. When it does, I want to be there to help make it right. OK?"

She was very touched by that. A part of her wished he had meant that for her alone, but she understood that to him, having a family was very important. Her other feelings would have to be patient for now. "OK, Harry. If something happens, I'll call."

"Thanks. Now, if you want to call to just talk in the evening because some brother has been a bother, and you need someone to blow off steam to, feel free was well. I'm usually pretty free after eight," he told her with a smile.

A giggle escaped her. "Thanks Harry, I'll definitely take you up on that."

"Oh, if you tell it 'mirror off', it will turn off, that way it's not sending whatever is in the room when it's just lying around, or in your pocket. That could be embarrassing." He blushed a bit.

She laughed and wondered what he'd done, or maybe was imagining. "I'll remember that too. Uh, Harry? I hate to go, but I probably should so I don't arouse too many suspicions."

He stood and held out his hands to help her up, but he did not immediately let go. "Thanks for being my friend Ginny. You don't know how much that means to me." He smiled as he let go of her hands. Before she could say anything, his right arm touched his left forearm and he was gone with a very slight crack.

Ginny sighed to herself. Hiding the mirror on her, she walked back to the house. Inside, she found an upset Ron.

"Where have you been?" he asked accusingly.

"Out for a walk Ron. I do that from time-to-time."

"Where did you disappear to?"

"What are you talking about?" She knew, but wanted to hear him say it.

"I, I followed you, and I know you went to the place you like to read, but you weren't there when I got there. How did you do that?"

"Ronald Weasley! You are not my minder. If I feel like going for a walk around our house, I will do so and it doesn't matter to you." Her wand came out. "Or do you want to formally challenge me on what you think you can do?" She stared at him, daring him to challenge her.

He gulped and unconsciously pushed back in his chair.

"What's going on in here?" her father asked from the doorway.

"Dad, Ron's trying to play protective brother again and follow me around, not to mention him snooping to find out who I write to. I'm sick and tired of it. I'm almost fifteen and I can take care of myself without his help."

Arthur Weasley looked at both of his children very carefully. This was not a new game in his house, just new players. "I'm not going to take sides in this, but I think I will say one or two things. Ron, do you remember what it was like a couple of years ago when Percy tried to protect you from everything?"

Ron nodded but didn't say a word.

"I know that at the time, you needed that because of the twins. But ignoring when the twins were after you, how did you feel about your older brother the other times he was that way?" Ron's face fell, and he looked at the floor.

Now Arthur looked to his daughter. "Ginny, I better not hear of you striking first, but if you need to defend yourself, please remember to make the damage repairable." With that said, he turned around and walked out.

Brother and sister looked at each other, and they came to a silent agreement. Ginny turned and went upstairs. This wasn't worth a mirror call, but it was her turn to write a letter.

## Chapter 4: Goals

(Sat 3 Aug)

Nymphadora Tonks walked into the Leaky Cauldron. A quick scan found her furry friend in a booth on the side with two Butterbeers on the table: one in front of him, and one in front of the seat across from him. She took that seat. "Hey, Handsome, what's up?"

Remus Lupin looked at the young woman. She was in pretty normal clothes for her: boots, utility pants with pockets on the thighs, a black shirt with pink polka dots; it would have been weird for anyone else. She was also sporting medium-length strawberry blonde hair today. He had noticed she had been giving him lots of glances over the last few months. Perhaps this was the day to find out if they really meant anything. "Hi, Beautiful. Nice day?"

She blushed slightly, but did not break eye contact. "For a day off, it's been going pretty well. How about for you? I heard you got a new job, but I haven't heard what." She took a long pull on her drink.

He smiled at her. "Funny you should mention that. I need a little help with that job. Feel up to a little excitement?"

A coy grin came over Tonks. "Depends, Moony; what did you have in mind? Perhaps a cozy chat or something?"

He chuckled. "Or something, though perhaps we can have a more personal conversation afterwards."

That got her interest. "Well, I think you can talk me into that." She downed the rest of her bottle in another long swallow. "So, what do I have to do before this -- conversation?"

"Finished with your drink?"

She tilted the bottle one last time. "Yep, it's empty."

Standing, he held out his hand. "Trust me."



It was a strange thing to say, but she did trust him. She took his hand as he pulled her up out of her seat, but he didn't let go. Instead, he held her hand tightly and touched his other hand to his wand. The instant she felt the squeeze as she was Side-Along-Apparated, off to who knew where meeting who knew what, all alerts in her head started going off.

Harry was getting tired of waiting. He had already finished his drink as he sat under a shade tree at the edge of a clearing not too far from Hogsmeade. Remus had brought him here, Disillusioned him, and told him to wait. He was about to have a pop quiz for his classes.

It did not really matter that it was a Saturday, he had nothing special to do today, other than a little flying on his Firebolt for fun. On the other hand, perhaps this was a good time for meditating, to practice finding his center. The work to become an Animagus seemed to be going slowly.

He was not sure how long he had been meditating quietly, when he heard a crack. His eyes instantly snapped open. His wand had already been in his hand, though lying in his lap; it jumped up in front of him. There about twenty feet away, were Lupin and Tonks.

The second the Apparation released her, she whipped out her wand pointing at her supposed friend while she glanced around. "What the hell do you think you're doing Remus?" She was mad and looked threatening.

"Sorry, Tonks, I suppose I could have given you a little more warning. I promise there are no Death Eaters here; although there is one person I do want you to meet." Remus looked around and finally saw a small ripple in the air, before a young man suddenly appeared.

"Wotcher, Tonks!"

"Harry?!" The sight of him released most of her anger.

"In person. How are you doing?"

"Harry? What are you doing here?"

"Not totally sure, but my teacher mentioned something about a pop quiz. So, did you bring your wand? I hear they're very useful for party games."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Don't be a smart-ass, Harry, you're not old enough yet."

"Since you already have your wand ready, Nymphadora," he cheekily taunted her, "let's find out." Remus started stepping back. He knew those were fighting words for her.

"All right, Harry. Let's see what you're made of." Tonks raised her wand and returned Harry's slight bow. "Go ahead, we'll start when you fire the first spell."

"Fair enough, just nothing too dangerous. Cuts are the only thing I've learned to heal."

"Agreed. Anyti..."

Harry shot an Expelliarmus at her. She didn't have time for a shield, so she dodged -- barely. They started flinging spells at each other. They didn't stop for almost two full minutes, until Harry nailed her with a full body bind. Breathing hard, he walked over to her and pulled the wand out of her frozen hand as she lay on the ground. Standing back up, he unfroze her. "You were saying, Nymphadora?"

She growled something he couldn't quite make out, but he'd have sworn the word "arse" was used in reference to him. He handed her wand back.

Harry walked backwards until they were twenty feet apart. He bowed slightly and told her, "I'll let you have the surprise first shot this time."

Tonks growled again, and with surprising agility, given her propensity to trip and fall down, she started dueling. It took nearly four minutes this time, but she ended up on the ground stunned.

Her opponent revived her and helped her up. "Perhaps we should let Moony start us for the rest, unless you're ready to give up."

"Take your place Potter. We've only started your testing." She vowed to herself to stop cutting him any slack and to not underestimate him.

Nearly an hour later, the score stood at seven wins for Harry and three wins for Tonks. They were both breathing hard and sitting under the shade tree next to Lupin. The man had offered each a Butterbeer, which he had brought with him in a shrunken ice chest.

"So this is your job, Remus?" the Auror asked.

"Yes, back to teaching, though I only have one student this time."

She nodded and drained her bottle. Handing it back to Remus, she got another full one. "Nice job, Harry. You know, if even half the Aurors could fight like you, we'd be doing much better."

"Thanks for the compliment. I hope you didn't mind us bringing you out here."

"Once I got over the thought that I was being kidnapped," she glared at her older friend, "it's been a fun afternoon."

"Great, I'm glad," Harry told her. "By the way, could you do me a favor?"

"Probably; ask." She looked at him, curious as to what he might ask for.

"Could you keep this afternoon to yourself? It would not be the end of the world if it got out, but I'd like to keep my whereabouts and abilities quiet for a while longer," Harry explained.

"I can, but I'd like to know why. Why did you run away, Harry?"

Harry thought about how to answer that. "Can I assume Mrs. Weasley shared the letter I wrote to her with the Order?"

"You can. While you gave an answer there, the general agreement was that answer was pretty vague." She looked at him steadily, and he held her gaze.

"I won't go into details, but understand that there have been a number of things in my life that have happened, things that I believe should not have happened. I also believe that I'm old enough now to have control over my life, despite some law that says I really need to be one year older before I do that. I don't want to wait another year. If mistakes are going to be made in my life, I want them to be my mistakes." He watched her to see what she would say.

"And what about Moony here?" she asked.

"I'm not so stupid as to think I can do this without help." Actually he had been for the first day or two, but he was not going to admit that. "He is one of a very small number of people who is giving me advice. He's also my teacher. From time to time, I will grow that circle of close friends, and I'll also reach out to others in limited ways. Today is one of the days I reach out for other help. Will you help me by keeping this day to yourself?"

Tonks looked at him and into his green eyes. His longer hair reminded her of Bill Weasley. His dueling style was a little bit of Remus, but mostly his own. He was becoming his own man she realized. With a mental snort, she wondered what he would think of her if she was near his age; but she already had someone she cared about.

She finally nodded. "Very well, Harry. I'll keep this to myself, at least for a little while. Eventually, people are going to need to know that you can take care of yourself."

The young man smiled at her. "Thanks, Tonks. I'll come out of the closet in time. I just need to get a bit further on my training first."

She laughed at that. "I look forward to it, Harry."

"Oh, I've got something for you, Nymphadora." He dug into a pocket, pulled out a piece of paper, and held it out to the woman who looked like she wanted to hex him for using her full name.

Tonks took the paper and almost choked when she read it. "You can't be serious!"

"Nope, I'm Harry; but it is from Sirius. He suggested it in his Will."

"I don't know what to say." She was flabbergasted.

"I'm sure Sirius would tell you to go have some fun with it. You know, go dye your hair a different color or something." He grinned at her.

She stuck out her tongue at him and turned her hair blue. "Thanks Harry. I don't know what I'll do with it, but I'm sure I'll think of something."

A happy Harry pulled out his Portkey, so Tonks wouldn't know he could Apparate, and went home. The remaining couple talked for the next couple of hours over a picnic basket Remus had brought with him.

(Mon 5 Aug)

After Harry's usual hour of working on his Animagus transformation, he and Lupin talked about the duels with Tonks. Overall, Lupin had been quite complimentary. Yet he also had some pointers for Harry, things he needed to correct. That took up the rest of the morning.

The afternoon was spent dueling and trying to get Harry to do the right thing. The second time Moony not only knocked him down, but knocked his glasses off, Harry threw his wand down in frustration.

"Uhh!" he groaned loudly and held his hands to his face.

Remus watched the boy as he had what appeared to be the equivalent of a temper-tantrum for a sixteen year old. The difference between him and a two year old was that Harry, in his anger, was making his wand and glasses vibrate on the floor. Trying to prevent accidental magic, he told his student, "Take a few deep breaths

Harry." He watched his student do that. "That's it; take a few more. Even when things go badly in a battle, keeping all of your wits is very important to finding a way out of a tight situation."

The teen dropped his hands to his side, though they were now fists being tightly squeezed. "I know! It's just that these glasses are such a liability. I can see it now. I lose them in a battle and get killed just because I can't see past my elbow."

"That can be fixed you know."

"What?!" Harry's head snapped to the fuzzy man.

"I said, that can be fixed. At the very least, we can get you contacts. There are spells that will fix things permanently too, or so I'm told."

"Well, what are we waiting for, let's go!" Harry got down on his hands and knees and finally found his glasses, then his wand. Standing up, he did a few spells and he was suddenly James York.

"Nice Harry, and very practical. Come on; let's go to the foyer so we can Apparate to Diagon Alley." Lupin led the way.

At the Alley, Lupin led them to a shop with spectacles in the window. Across the window of the shop were the words: Healer Payne, Eye Specialist.

Harry looked at his teacher. "Yes, I know, Harry. No healer should have a name that sounds like that, but he is one of the best around."

Nearly an hour later, Harry walked out fifty Galleons lighter, but able to see without glasses. His new contacts would also repel dust, as well as automatically change with his vision. He only had to come back in a couple of years to have them renewed. Healer Payne had also said that at that time, after he stopped growing, he might be able to have his eyes fixed and avoid contacts too.

Harry was ready to go home and try another duel, but Lupin had other plans. "Harry, since we're out, I've been thinking about something else you need to spend some money on. Follow me." He

led Harry out into the Muggle world and to a sporting goods store.

By the time Harry handed over his Muggle credit card, there was a pile of boxes for exercise equipment, weights, a unicycle, and a dozen little leather balls called "Hacky Sacks" (which Harry had no idea what they would be used for).

Lupin had Harry distract the store employee, while he shrunk all the boxes down and put them in the bag with the Hacky Sacks. Fortunately, the boxes' weight shrank with their size. Then Lupin convinced the employee that his co-worker had already taken the boxes outside for them. Harry smirked at that as he left with Remus. Outside, they walked into the alley behind the store and Apparated back to the Manor.

Arriving back, Harry turned to his teacher. "Where are we going to put all the exercise equipment?"

"No idea, but it's your house. Like I told you in the store, you're in pretty good shape, but if you want to be really good in the longer duels, or in battles that take more than five minutes, you need to be in better shape. Install the equipment tonight, and start using it every day. Also, start running laps around the house. You need to build your endurance."

"All right, but I still don't know where to put it all."

"Ask Nathaniel, he can help you," Remus suggested.

"Huh? How did you know about him?"

"Your dad showed him to me once. Come on, let's go and I'll show you something." Lupin put the bag down and they went up the stairs.

"By the way, what's the unicycle for?"

"I want you to learn to ride it to improve your balance," Lupin explained.

"Oh. And the little balls?"

"I want you to learn to juggle to increase your hand-eye coordination. I want you to do at least three and hopefully four. I got extras in case you lose them or you have friends over."

They walked into the master bedroom, then into the study. "Nate," Harry called out. "We have a question for you."

"Nate?" Lupin said softly.

"Yeah, his real name is too long," he told his teacher. "So what did you want to ask him?"

"Nathaniel, can you show us the floor the Dueling room is on?" Remus asked.

"Is that what you want Harry?" the portrait asked.

"Yes," Harry said, not knowing what was going to happen. Then the portrait changed and there was a map of the first floor of the Manor.

"Remind you of something Harry?" he teacher asked with a smile.

"Yeah. Hey Nate. Can you show us the second floor?"

"Aye." The portrait changed to a different map, and in the master bedroom study, there were two little squares, one with each of their names on it.

"One guess as to where we got the idea for the Marauder's Map." Lupin grinned at the young man.

"That is definitely spiffing. Back to the first floor please, Nate." The map changed. The two men looked at it for a moment. "Nate? What is this room here?" Harry pointed to a room and hoped the portrait could see it.

"It is merely a storeroom, Harry. I do not know what is in it."



"Looks to be the right size, Harry. Let's go check it out," Moony suggested.

They went down and found the room about half empty. It looked to be holding old furniture and a few boxes. "Yes, this looks good. I'd suggest cleaning out this room, Dobby can help you. Then resize all the equipment back to the proper size and arrange it. Finally, attach it to the walls; but don't use a Sticking Charm. It needs to be attached the Muggle way, so it won't fall down while you're using it."

Harry agreed and got started; Lupin left for the evening.  
(Sun 11 Aug)

After he finished his lunch, Harry checked his appearance in the full length mirror one last time. It was about what he wanted. His coat was a bit warm, but it did look good on him and he wanted it. He never knew what would happen around him. Ginny's birthday was not a secret, nor was Harry's friendship to the family. Still, he wanted to see them, and this seemed like a good time to see all the Weasleys at once.

He went to the foyer. Taking a deep breath, as he was not sure of the reception he would get, he Apparated to the back door of The Burrow. Lots of conversation noise came through the door. That made him smile and want to go in even more, so he knocked. Most of the conversation instantly died.

Bill came to the door and opened it. "Yes? May I help you?"

Harry noticed the wand in his friend's hand that hung at his side. "Hello Bill. How are you doing?"

The oldest Weasley boy looked closely. "Do I know you?"

"Yes, I'm sure you do."

Bill still did not recognize him, but someone else did. Pushing her brother aside, she rushed out onto the porch calling, "Harry!" and threw her arms around him. "You came, I didn't think you would. And

I love you without glasses, it's easier to see your eyes this way." She finally released him, though she felt this was the perfect opportunity to do a bit more with him, so she grabbed his hand and dragged the visitor in past her oldest brother.

"Harry?" Bill was surprised. He did not recognize him without glasses and with the long hair like himself. The missing scar, due to the glamour, also confused him.

Hermione rushed over and gave him a hug too. "Harry, I'm so glad to see you're all right," she told his shoulder as she gave him a long hug. "I can't believe you did that without telling us first. Honestly, what were you thinking?"

As Hermione released him, he was passed to the next female, who also enveloped him in a hug. "Harry, it's so good to see you dear." Mrs. Weasley told him. "I'm glad you're safe. But you are in so much trouble for running away young man."

Harry thought the first two females had worked out pretty well. This last one and most of the men did not seem to look as happy. "I'm sorry you feel that way Mrs. Weasley. While I do think of you as a mum, please understand that this is my decision and I had to do this."

Before his psuedo-mum could argue more, Ron asked, "Where have you been, Harry?" His tone was not charitable.

"Ron, leave him alone. He just got here," his father told him.

"Fine, I'll wait ten minutes before I nail him to the wall," the boy muttered, though Harry heard him.

Ginny grabbed his hand again and started pulling him towards the table. "Come on, we were just having the cake. You can sit by the birthday girl." She smiled at his slight discomfort. Another chair was pulled up and set next to Ginny's, and her mum got him a piece of cake. Most of the other pieces on the table were at least half eaten. Ron was starting his second piece.

"So Harry, what have you been doing?" Hermione asked in her typical business-like fashion.

"Oh, you know, the usual when you move out on your own: setting up a place to live, making sure you have everything, reading a lot, studying, relaxing a bit, uh, whatever. It's been mostly fun. In fact, it's probably been the best summer of my life."

"Where are you living?" Molly asked.

"In a very safe place, Mrs. Weasley. I mostly stay there, though I do come out at random times in disguise. Safety is very important," Harry answered.

"Yeah, but where?" Ron grilled him.

"In a very safe place, Ron. I'll take you there when it's all set up, but that probably won't be for a while."

"Why not Harry?" Hermione wanted to know.

"Sorry, but it takes time to work out those kinds of details. I'm a bit paranoid considering what I've gone through in the past, so until things are one hundred and ten percent safe, I'm keeping a number of secrets."

"Are you eating all right, Harry?" Mrs. Weasley asked.

Harry chuckled. "Yes ma'am. I can cook, but I've also got a house elf who cooks almost as well as you do, so I won't be starving."

"A house elf?! How could you Harry?" Hermione was outraged.

A sigh escaped Harry. "Hermione, don't get your knickers in a twist." The Weasley boys chuckled at that. "First, it's Dobby who's a free elf. Second, he's getting paid and has days off. Everything you want for house elves." The girl subsided and Harry decided it was best not to mention Winky. "That reminds me Hermione, you're going to need to go talk to the house elves at school and promise them you won't leave any clothes around the Gryffindor Tower this year, or it won't be

cleaned at all, like what happened in our third year. Dobby was still the only elf who would go up there last year, and he won't be there this year."

Ron groaned at that.

"Maybe that would be good for us," Hermione proclaimed.

"Hermione, I understand what you're trying to do, but you're also upsetting the system too much," Ginny told her. "Besides, if you don't go talk to the elves, I will go talk to Professor McGonagall about it." Hermione looked offended at the threat.

"She's right," Charlie agreed. "Most magical creatures can't adapt to large changes. If you want to accomplish your goal, you'll need small changes over a long period of time. House elves are quite intelligent, but it's not their understanding that you're attacking. You're attacking their culture." Hermione looked at him very thoughtfully.

Trying to change the subject to something less controversial, Mr. Weasley spoke up. "Are you looking forward to school Harry? It starts in three weeks."

Harry was dreading this topic, but decided to just get it out of the way. The alternative was lying, which would catch up with him in three weeks. "It doesn't matter, I'm already in school."

"What do you mean: you're already in school?" Hermione asked.

"Just that. I have a private tutor and am doing school work, which I will continue for the next year." He decided to see who would decipher that first. Typically, it was Hermione.

"What? You mean you're not coming back to Hogwarts?"

"No, at least not for this coming year. I'll take a leave of absence for this year, and re-evaluate it next year."

"Why?" It was Ron who asked.

"Because normal school is not my priority or focus right now. My private tutoring will help me achieve my goals better at this time. When I've done that, I'll re-enroll in Hogwarts, or if they won't let me back in, I'll finish school somewhere else." Harry was very calm about it all, but there were shocked faces all around. Ginny's was the least shocked, and he thought hers was probably fake, since she had heard this before.

"That doesn't make sense," Hermione objected.

"Sure it does Hermione. You're just not thinking about it from my point of view." Her look told him to enlighten her. "Look, everyone has a main goal or focus. It can change over time, especially if you accomplish what you're after, but there is something driving most people. Wouldn't you agree?"

"So far," she said tentatively.

"Take you for example. You're objecting because your main focus right now is school, or learning. So you're having trouble seeing why I don't think that too. Now there is the common sense thinking that a good education is important, but ignoring that, your focus is blinding you somewhat."

Hermione didn't say anything, but he saw a smile on Ron and Ginny's faces.

"Ron here, if there were no obstacles, would probably pursue Quidditch full time."

"You got that right mate." Ron got a number of laughs.

"Ginny, I'm not sure about yet, but I'm thinking you haven't really decided what you want to do. Though I do think school is pretty important to you."

The birthday girl smiled. "Pretty good Harry. I'm still thinking things through, and I do want to do well in school so as not to limit myself. You're doing well at this so far."

Harry smiled. "The twins here are all about having fun, as their joke shop indicates." They laughed. "Charlie is obviously into dragons, or maybe danger; but since I equate those two things, I'm tempted to say both." Charlie chuckled at that. "Bill here seems to love riddles and solving them." Bill smiled at that. "Mr. Weasley would pursue Muggles all day if allowed. Oh wait, he already does." They all laughed at that. "And no one is as devoted to their family as Mrs. Weasley." She smiled.

"But Harry, those are just generalizations," Hermione objected. "And what does that have to do with you?"

"Yes, they are generalizations, but I was pointing out that everyone has a main focus in life that tends to drive what they do or seek. Therefore, I'm no different. My point is that my present focus is one that says Hogwarts is not the best place for me right now, private tutoring is the best way for me to get the education I need to accomplish my goal."

"What is your goal or focus, Harry?"

"What do you think Hermione? This should be easy for you," Harry challenged her. She did not answer. After several seconds of silence, he asked, "Ron?" He sat there silent too. Finally he looked beside him. "Ginny, what have I faced every year for the last five years?"

"Death Eaters or Tom Riddle," Ginny answered with almost no hesitation.

"So Hermione, if my main focus is the war waged by Voldemort, what would you suggest I do for the next year?" Harry looked straight at her as serious as he could.

Eventually she told him, "I - I don't know Harry. You've obviously thought about this a lot more than I have."

"While that is true, I suspect you have arrived at the same conclusion I came to, but you don't like it." The girl hung her head. "That's OK Hermione, I didn't particularly like it either, but I've decided to accept it and go on with life."

"But son, you can't do that all alone," Arthur stated very matter-of-factly.

"Yes sir, you are correct. At first, I won't need much help, because I'm mainly training. I have a trusted teacher and mentor to help me for now. Eventually, I'll expand the list of people who are helping me very directly. Also, there are many levels of help. For example, every one of you here is already helping me by being my family. Over time, I'll ask some of you for a little more direct help, though it may be in surprising ways. Please be patient with me, I'm having to make this up as I go." The last part got a few chuckles.

Harry tried to liven up the atmosphere. "Hey, enough about me, it's not my birthday." It did not help much as everyone stayed fairly quiet as they thought about what Harry had said. Giving up, he picked up his plate and headed for the kitchen to put it in the sink. As he did, he found Ron behind him.

"Harry, why can't I help you now?"

Harry wasn't sure he'd ever seen Ron look so serious. "Because, I haven't figured out how to let you yet. Ron, even if we started working on something together now, you're about to leave for school in three weeks. All my projects right now are long term projects. I'll find something for you, but I need time."

"Maybe I should leave school for a year too."

"Ron," Harry said with a slight sigh. "My way of doing things is not your way of doing things, the reverse is also true. Besides, your parents wouldn't let you not return to school this year."

"I could run away too."

Harry smiled. "And part of me would like that, but I don't think that's really the best path for you. You're still my best mate, it'll just have to be from a distance for a while." Harry left the kitchen to rejoin the party. He hated to push his friend away, but felt he had no choice at the moment. Perhaps he could reach out to his friend through letters.

Ron did not come out of the kitchen immediately, and when Harry saw him later, Ron seemed to be watching him as if trying to figure him out.

Back out with everyone else, Harry approached Mrs. Weasley. "Excuse me, but do you have a letter for me?"

She jumped slightly. "Oh Harry, I'm so sorry I forgot. Here, let me get them." She went to a cabinet and pulled out two letters and handed them to him.

"Thanks!" he told her. Opening one, he found his list for sixth year Hogwarts' students. He would have to send a letter to Dumbledore about that tomorrow, or maybe he'd send it to McGonagall instead since her name was at the bottom of this letter. The other letter was the one he had been anticipating. Opening it, he saw the results of his OWLs.

"How did you do?" Ginny asked him quietly from right beside him.

He jerked slightly in surprise, as he had not noticed her walking up to him.

"About as expected. I failed Divination and History of Magic. I got an OWL in everything else. I suppose the Outstanding in Potions is a bit surprising, but not having Snape ridicule me during the test was very helpful to my concentration. Hmm, that reminds me, I need to talk to your brothers." He smiled at her and handed her his OWL scores for her to look at more closely.

Harry walked over to George and tapped him on the shoulder. When both of the twins looked up at him, he crooked his finger and walked into the next room. They followed.

"What's up Harry?" George asked.

"Need something only we have?" Fred queried him.

"Like our dashing good looks?"



"I was thinking our sense of humor, though I do think his actions are a prank in a special category."

"Only too true, Bro."

"It definitely tops our stunt with Umbridge, as Dumbledore is none too happy."

"Guys," Harry jumped in, afraid he'd be listening to them all day. "I need a favor from you, or maybe I need to swap services or something."

"Hear that George? He needs us."

"Of course, everyone needs us."

"Guys! What I need is a Potions teacher, and considering how much of your work is based on Potions, and how amazing some of it is, I think you could help me," Harry explained.

"Interesting."

"Very. What did you propose to barter?"

"Maybe he'd help us test some new products."

"Nice one Fred."

"How about I help you create existing products to make up the time you spend with me? I might even come up with some new product ideas too," Harry suggested.

"I like the way he thinks, Bro."

"Well, he is part owner, so he can't be too bad."

"So you'll do it?" Harry felt hopeful.

"Sure Harry."

"Just for you."

"Thanks guys! I'll be in touch with you in a few weeks. It'll probably be in the evenings as I don't want to disrupt your business," Harry told them and returned to the main room.

"What was that about?" Ginny whispered into his ear.

Harry thought that tickled and smiled. "Just a little business, I'll explain later," he told her.

The afternoon went swiftly, and when Mrs. Weasley said dinner was soon, Harry told everyone he had to leave.

"But we're just about to eat!" Ron exclaimed.

Harry smiled. "Sounds wonderful Ron, but I really do need to be going. I need to leave as I shouldn't be gone for too long. I might turn into a pumpkin or something." Ron looked at him strangely, while Hermione rolled her eyes.

Seeing Ginny not too far away, he walked over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Bye Ginny. I hope you've had a happy birthday."

She surprised him by stepping up to him and giving him another hug. "Thanks again for Zeus, Harry. I have trouble imagining a better gift."

When she let him go, he again felt that small sense of loss and didn't want to go, but he knew he had to. "Bye everyone!" he called and walked out the back door. To be discreet, he walked around the corner of the house before he pulled out his Manor Portkey and went home.

"I still wonder why he's doing all of this," Ron commented.

"Obvious, it's his saving people thing," Hermione answered.

Ginny looked at both of them. "Maybe he wants to survive the war." She turned around to go talk to Charlie. Ron looked at her, still not sure if either answer was correct.

(Mon 12 Aug)

Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, was sitting at his desk going over requests from the teachers. As he denied a request from Professor Sprout for yet another greenhouse, a snowy white owl came to him and landed on his desk. He recognized this owl and was concerned.

Having received a report from Molly Weasley last night, he basically knew what this letter contained. Nevertheless, he knew he needed to read it. The bird flew off as soon as the letter was untied.

Dear Professor Dumbledore,

Having just received my book list for the coming school year, I am reminded that I need to inform you that I shall be taking a leave of absence for the coming school year to pursue more important matters to me. I know you are well aware of what I speak. Hopefully, circumstances will allow me to return next year. If that is not possible, please let me know so I may seek out other schools to finish my education when circumstances allow.

On another matter, I have been informed that I am now the sole owner of a house in London.

Dumbledore's bushy white eyebrows jumped to the top of his forehead as he read that, and he suddenly became worried.

The group that meets there may continue to do so on one condition: That I be added to the Fidelius Charm as a secondary Secret Keeper. I desire to have the ability to grant others access to the house in the case of an emergency; I promise to inform you should the rare occasion arise. My recent research has shown this is possible without removing and recasting the spell. I will give you some time to research that if you need to, as well as consider the question. I also request that no items on the property at this time be removed in any way, and I hold you personally responsible to ensure that happens. I

suggest you prevent Mundungus Fletcher's access in order to avoid problems.

I shall be in touch regarding the questions above.

Sincerely,  
Harry Potter

As the Headmaster leaned back in his chair, Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, burst into his office. "Albus, I've just received a letter from Harry Potter! It says he's not returning to school next year."

"Yes, I've just received a letter from him that mentioned that. Did yours discuss any other topics?"

"No, Albus, just that he would not be here this year, though he would like to return in a later year. Doesn't he have to come to school?" she asked.

"Not exactly. It's a somewhat gray area in the law for children under seventeen. The most obvious loophole is for him to hire a private teacher for a year."

The Headmaster sighed. For the last month or so, Harry Potter had been an enigma to him. He knew the boy was upset over losing Sirius, but he also thought everything had been worked out during their conversation after the incident in the Department of Mysteries. He had received snippets of answers and observations from letters and discussions with the few people Harry had visited since his disappearance, but Albus knew there was more to this problem than met the eye. He really wished he could find out what the problem really was. Alas, the answer did not seem to be forthcoming.

"What can we do?" Minerva asked, breaking into Dumbledore's thoughts.

"Presently, we can drop him from the roll and inform him that we would like him to return next year. I don't know that we can do much more unless we can talk to him; and that doesn't seem likely to

happen before the coming term starts," he said with a slightly aggravated tone. He had sent letters via several owls and Fawkes, and all had come back undelivered. If Fawkes couldn't find the boy, he was well hidden, almost certainly under a Fidelius Charm.

He dropped the letter in a drawer for now. He'd take up the question of Headquarters with the Order at their scheduled meeting tomorrow night.

A/N: Is it possible to have multiple secret keepers on a Fidelius Charm? I've decided that it is, as it would be extremely useful should the "primary" secret keeper die suddenly. This may not be possible in JKR's version of the HP universe, but I don't plan to lose any sleep over it. She already has at least a couple inconsistencies with the Fidelius Charm, so my adding one more should not be much of a problem. :-

## Chapter 5: Understanding Harry

(Fri 16 Aug)

Remus sat in the Three Broomsticks nursing a drink. His back was to the wall and a window was nearby. He really had not wanted to meet here, but his contact did. Finally, his contact stumped in and made his way over.

"Remus."

"Alastor. Drink?"

"No thanks, I've got my own."

"Suit yourself," the werewolf blandly replied. "Here's your ID back." He slid a small piece of paper back to the ex-Auror; it had a code number on it.

Moody verified it was the proper number for this meeting before he touched his wand to it, Vanishing it without ever touching the paper with his hand. "What did you want to talk about that we couldn't discuss at the meeting the other night?"

"I need some help Alastor, some very discreet help. I need to evaluate a person and I'd like to draw on your experience."

"What for?"

Lupin was having to be very careful as his friend was quite paranoid. "Let's say that I've got a friend who's probably capable of joining the Order, and I want to find out if he's good enough."

"You're a good dueler, Remus. Why me?"

"Because Alastor, I need a second opinion. I need someone who's been out there fighting Death Eaters. This person wants to do that too." Lupin hoped that would convince him.

"You're hiding something Remus. I can tell."

Remus sighed. "Yes I am. I'm hiding the person's identity at his request, but that's all I'm hiding. He's not a Death Eater, this is not a setup, I haven't turned, Alastor. I'm just trying to set up a meeting, a meeting between two paranoid people. He's almost as bad as you."

That actually brought a grin to the old Auror's face. "So let's say agree. How I do I meet this person?"

"You can Side-Along-Apparate with me, or we can walk about a mile. You choose. Unless you have a pair of brooms handy. I didn't think to bring any." Lupin waited.

The older man harrumphed. "I haven't been on a broom in a long time. All right, I'll trust you. But if you're leading me into a trap, I swear I'll draw and quarter you myself -- with a silver knife."

Lupin chuckled. "Fair enough. Shall we go outside then?" They got up and went out to the side of the building. Alastor drew his wand and with his free hand held onto Remus' arm. Remus concentrated on the field nearby and Apparated.

Landing, Alastor quickly swept the area with his magical eye. All he saw was one person who was Disillusioned. "Show yourself," he commanded the person waiting for them as he pointed his wand in that direction. The Disillusionment ended, and there stood thin young man in a dark cloak, no glasses, dark hair down to his shoulders, and holding a wand in his right hand at his side and pointing down.

"Good evening, Mad-Eye. Or would you prefer Professor Moody?"

The voice finally clued him in. "Is that you Potter?"

"Yes sir. Remus is hoping you'll help him test me. Will you?"

"Test you in what?"

"I've been training in Defense. I do quite well against Moony, but I also need to experience other people, other styles, other thinking. I

need to know how well my training is going without getting myself killed. Will you help me? Please?" Harry had stood completely still while talking, so as not to make Mad-Eye nervous.

"You mean like dueling practice."

"Exactly, sir."

Alastor magical eye swiveled around again, but it was still only the three of them. "Why me?"

"Surely Moony told you why; but my reasons are because I know you're good and because I respect you. Your reputation precedes you; therefore, you are a good measurement. I'm sorry if that's rude, but I thought you'd prefer an honest answer."

The ex-Auror nodded. "I understand. So how do you want to do this?"

"The basic duel will be fine. Moony can start us. Nothing too bad please. I've now learned healing spells for minor cuts and simple fractures, so if we can keep injuries to that level or less I would appreciate it. I'm also thinking about ten rounds, or whatever we can fit in an hour. Is that acceptable to you?" Harry watched the ex-Auror consider that.

"Not overly realistic, but acceptable."

Harry grinned. "I fully agree. I know lethal spells, but I also don't want either of us to get hurt too much." He shrugged off his cloak and got ready. Moody did the same.

Fifty minutes later, the score stood at seven to three in Harry's favor. He'd lost the first couple until he figured out what Mad-Eye was doing. His adjustments made it much harder for the Auror, who wasn't as mobile.

"Not bad Potter. Surprised you at first, didn't I?"



"Yes sir, but that was the whole point of this. I've learned several things today. Moony and I will go over the duels this afternoon and I'm sure I'll learn more," Harry said with a slight smile.

"Good, I'm glad I could help."

"May I ask for one more favor? It would be a big help to me," Harry told him.

"Ask."

"Will you please keep this training session to yourself? I'm not quite ready to advertise myself or my abilities yet," Harry explained.

"Understand." Mad-Eye looked at him as if judging him. "I'll keep this time to myself on one condition: You have a conversation with Albus on why you ran away, and what you're trying to do."

Harry was surprised at that. "I - I do plan to do that, eventually. I'm not sure I'm ready yet."

"That's my price for silence. Talk to him before the end of August, or I'm free to say I've seen you alive, and that you're training very hard in dueling," Moody proclaimed.

"Hmm, it would not be the end of the world if that information came out." Harry thought about it. Did he want to have that conversation with the Headmaster in the next two weeks? Maybe it would be good for the Order to know he was in training. He looked at his teacher. "Moony, what's your opinion. Would it be better for the knowledge of my training to come out now, or for it to remain secret for a while longer?"

His mentor thought about that. "That's tough to say Harry. I will point out that you've had a policy of as much privacy for as long as possible. So the question is whether that policy is no longer valid."

Harry nodded. "Very well, Mad-Eye. I'll talk to the Headmaster on the last Friday of the month. Is that acceptable?"

"It is. I look forward to the Order meeting after that time. I suspect it will be interesting," Moody speculated.

"I would think so, but then again, the Headmaster has a tendency to not tell or explain things, so it might be very boring," Harry pointed out.

Moody gave him a toothy grin. "Not if I can help it." With that, he Apparated away.

"Shall we go back?" Remus asked.

"Sure, hold on to me." Harry pulled out his Manor Portkey and they both went back to Potter Manor.

A late lunch was welcomed by both. They talked of the duels for the rest of the afternoon. Besides learning a few things, Harry came up with the idea of practice dummies: Animated objects that looked like people and could fire a basic spell, like a Stunner, but something Harry could fire the more dangerous spells at. They would also allow him to practice two or even three on one. Remus agreed to research that.

(Sat 24 Aug)

For one of the few times this summer, Ginny was bored. Dad was at work. Mum was out shopping, and would be so for the next several hours. Ron was here, but he was in his room with his head in a Quidditch magazine. All her summer homework was done, and she wasn't allowed to fly in the paddock.

That last thought gave her an idea. Going out to get her broom, she came in and threw some Floo powder in the fireplace. "Potter Manor in Wales," she whispered.

Walking into the big house, Winky greeted her. "Miz Wheazey."

"Hi Winky. Is Harry here?"

"Yes Miz, he is working out as he says. Please follow me." The elf led her towards the wing of the house that had the Dueling Room, if she

remembered correctly. "He is in the last room on the left," the elf told Ginny before she left.

Ginny wondered what "working out" was, but she assumed she would find out very soon. As she neared the room, she heard metal softly clanking. Peering in the door, she found a sight she had not expected, but was very exciting to see.

In almost all of his glory, as he was only wearing a pair of black shorts, Harry Potter stood with his back to her. He was lifting and lowering a bar with some round things on the end. His muscles were flexed and slowly moving. He was not bulked out or anything, but there was some nice definition in his muscles, and he had an obvious wiry strength all over him. His hair was pulled back and he had a sheen all over him. Mesmerized, she stood in the doorway and watched him "work out".

He gave small grunts as he lifted the bar. Setting the bar down after a number of lifts, he grabbed a small towel and wiped his face. Laying the towel back down, he turned to do something else when he saw her. "Ginny?" His eyes started darting around as if searching for something, and he seemed to blush slightly over most of his body.

Ginny giggled. "Hi Harry. It is so good to see you." He seemed to blush even more at her innuendo. "If I had a camera right now, I could make a fortune. Girls all over England would pay to see what I'm seeing right now."

"Ginny!"

She laughed. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"How good looking you are, Mr. Potter." She continued to smile at him.

"I, ah, no, I don't think I'm all that special."

Her smile got bigger. "Well, I like what I see."

Harry could not believe this conversation. It was as if she liked him or something. Maybe that look on her face meant something after all. "So, what's up? Why are you here?"

"You said I could come over if I wanted. I was bored and looking for someone to talk to, and I thought you might be the same way," she told him, still smiling at him.

"I bet you really wanted to fly," he nodded at the broom in her hand.

"The thought crossed my mind, but I'm open to other possibilities," she admitted honestly.

"OK, let me go take a quick shower. If you want something to drink while you wait, ask Winky." He made to walk out and she let him by.

"I'll wait in the library if you don't mind. I'd like to see what you have in there."

"Sure, help yourself." He left her for a shower and a change.

Ginny looked around in the library. It was like having the Hogwarts library all to herself, the restricted section and all. Floorspace-wise, it was smaller than the one at Hogwarts, but the shelves went higher here, and there were more shelves in the middle. Guessing, she felt there might be slightly more books here than at school.

She was checking out a book on magical creatures that live in the ocean when Harry returned. "Find anything interesting?"

"Harry, this place is incredible! I'd love to live here."

He smirked at her. Deciding to be daring, he flirted. "That could be arranged." She blushed. "I have sixteen other bedrooms; you could have your pick."

Realizing she had been had, she coyly told him, "Oh you." Putting the book back on the shelf, she turned to him more fully. He was in a tight medium blue T-shirt and jeans, along with some trainers. They all

looked new. Feeling bold, she walked up to him and put her hand up to his still slightly damp hair and slowly let her fingertips go through it. It was so soft. "It's really hard to decide," she finally spoke. "The short messy look seemed so sexy, but I like this longer look too."

Harry stood rock still as she touched his hair. It was like he could feel her power as she did it. He kept having to swallow and working hard not to close his eyes and just enjoy it. By keeping his eyes open, he was able to look into her brown ones, and they looked very fine. "So which do you like better?" he finally and softly got out.

Running her fingertips through it again gave her the answer. "I think I like this better, though I reserve the right to change my mind," she told him with a smile.

"Last time, you said I have an air of mystery, that it was something women like. Is this part of it?" He wanted to know more of what she thought of him.

"Yes, but the mystery is more. There's always the question of what a person is really like, but lately, you seem to be so much more. You've changed a lot since we left school in June." Ginny was curious, and she had been thinking about him a lot since her birthday.

"I probably have changed a lot. Quite a bit has happened because I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"Like what?" she wanted to know.

Reaching up, he gently caught her hand and pulled her over to the couch in front of the fireplace. He had her sit on one end while he sat on the other, both comfortably turned and facing the other. "About me, my life, the world, how things work, how people work, magic, what the future might hold for me."

"That's a lot of things Harry."

"Yeah, but I've had the time. Moony has helped me to clarify a few things, but most of it has been me. A person can't help but be different when you realize you have to change."

She nodded. "So what caused the big change?"

"As I said a few weeks back, it was realizing what had happened to me because of Dumbledore."

"Surely that's not all."

"No," he told her in whisper.

She looked at him and then reached out for his hand. "Tell me."

Part of him was afraid to tell her, yet, part of him wanted to share the burden with someone, anyone, who cared about him. He had not even shared it with Moony. But as he looked into her eyes, he saw trust, caring, and acceptance. It all added up to something a family member would do to help another. "I know the Prophecy," he softly told her.

Ginny looked shocked. "You have to be the one to kill Tom, don't you?"

Now he looked shocked. "How did you know?"

A sad smile came to her. "All the clues are there Harry. You isolating yourself, quitting school to heavily train, being very security conscious, and now knowing the prophecy was about you. The only logical conclusion is that you have to be the one to take care of Tom. Of course, there's also your history where he keeps coming after you too."

He gave her a small smile. "There is that too. What to hear the whole thing?" She nodded, so he quoted it for her.

Ginny thought for a few moments, then made up her mind. "Very well, Harry, we'll help you as best we can. If you have special needs we can help with, tell us. Otherwise, about all we can do for now is train to help you when you need us. I need your special Galleon for the DA."

"Huh?"

"I need your Galleon that you used for the DA," Ginny told him again. "Since you're not going to be there, and the DA needs to continue, I'll lead it. Your coin was the one the others were tied to, so I need it to set the meeting times. Even if we have a competent Defense teacher this year, the extra work will be helpful. Also, as you learn new spells and tactics, you can teach me, and I'll teach everyone else."

"Ginny..."

"No Harry, my mind is made up. We can help in this way. If nothing else, then everyone who's in it will be that much better prepared should Death Eaters come knocking on their door at home. Now, get up and get your coin for me." She stood and pulled him up. When he did not move, she got behind him and started pushing. He got the message and went upstairs with a chuckle.

When he came back down, she reached out her hand and took the coin from him. As she put it in her pocket, she told him. "There. Now we can have some fun. Come on Harry, you promised me a broom ride and I want to collect."

He laughed at her expression and took her outside after he collected his broom. He took her up and they hovered next to each other high above the house.

"I don't see anything else but fields, Harry."

"That's because I don't live under a single Fidelius, but eight of them." Her eyes bugged out at that. "I couldn't do only one," he explained, "the property is too big. The house and a little area around it is one. It took seven more to hide the rest of the property. Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yes."

He started telling her the secrets. One by one she saw the new sections of Potter Estates around the Manor. The front gate area and

the Quidditch pitch area were especially interesting. The area with the stables also got her attention.

"Do you have horses too?" she asked.

"No," he told her with a smile. "I could get some if you ask very nicely."

She giggled at that. "Be careful, I might. Let's fly to the pitch. Last one there is a rotten dragon's egg!" She took off as fast as she could.

Harry had no trouble catching up on his Firebolt, though he didn't try too hard, so he barely beat her. Getting her to land, he came up to her. "Hop on, Ginny, and I'll show you how to really fly."

Laughing, she told him, "Right, Potter. You can't really do any better than I can."

Grinning, he challenged her. "Then don't be a chicken and come over here. I'll show you, up close and personal."

Rising to the challenge, she came over and climbed on behind him. "Hold on tight," he told her as he felt her arms go around him. "I'll do a few things first to make sure I know how it will handle with both of us on it, and then you'll be sorry you ever said anything."

She laughed again. "Go ahead Potter, do your worst."

With a mischievous grin, he took off. After trying a few maneuvers to make sure he knew what the acceleration and handling was like with the two of them, he pulled up on the broomstick and started going almost straight up. Her grip on him tightened considerably and he heard a few noises from her.

Leveling out nearly five hundred feet in the air, he asked her over his shoulder. "Pretty up here, isn't it?"

"Lovely," she answered in a normal voice, surprising herself slightly. The vertical climb had been intense for a few seconds.



He pointed down. "Is that Dobby down there trying to get our attention?" When he saw her look down, he pushed the broomstick down and went into a power dive. She screamed bloody murder. Even with her second lungful, he didn't let up. The earth was coming up fast. At the last possible second, he pulled up hard in a perfect Wronski Feint, their toes hitting the six inch high grass.

Going into a small turn to head back to her broom, he stopped, but had trouble dismounting. She was hanging onto him so tightly it was hard to move. Despite her hugging him for dear life, he managed to get off and turn around in her arms that were around him. "You all right, Ginny?" he asked as he softly rubbed her back. She was breathing very raggedly.

A few minutes later, she finally lifted her pale face up from his chest to look at him. "Don't you ever do that again Harry. I think I just lost ten years of my life."

"But Ginny, that's a standard Seeker move. Something we real Seekers do every day," he joked with her while keeping a straight face.

"You are such a prat," she told him and tried to pull her arm out so she could slug him, but he kept a tight grip around her and held her close. She ceased struggling after a moment, but she still glared at him.

"But Ginny, you asked for that. I've got it in writing. I can go get it and show you."

Suddenly, she stopped struggling and started to enjoy being held. With a small smile, she admitted, "Yeah, I guess I did ask for that." She continued to stand there, feeling good in his arms, feeling his body against hers, and enjoying the smell of him, or maybe it was his soap.

As suddenly as she'd stopped struggling a few moments ago, he suddenly let her go as a look of confusion passed over his face. "I - we - we need to go back in."

She did not want him to let go, she had liked being held tremendously. The look on his face was quite telling though. He had just discovered something in himself and was trying to figure out what it was. That added another spark to the smoldering in her heart, and a small flame finally ignited. Emboldened in her emotions, she rose up on her toes slightly and planted a simple kiss on his cheek. "Thanks for the ride Harry, thanks for keeping your promise."

Picking up her broom that was nearby, they slowly walked back to the Manor, though Harry did not say anything at all. Ginny snuck glances at him, and saw him thinking very hard.

Fearing her mother would be back soon, Ginny decided to go ahead and leave. "I don't know that I'll get another chance to come visit any time soon Harry, but I had a wonderful time."

Harry's expression looked almost normal again. "I'm glad you came, Ginny. Oh, I've got something for you." He led her back to the library, took a book off the shelf, and handed it to her.

"What's this for?" she asked as she read the title, "Occlumency Explained".

"Now that you have some special secrets of mine, you need to learn this," he encouraged her. "I found the book helpful for teaching me the basics, though I'm still going to try to find a teacher so I can learn more. That book also taught me more than all the lessons Snape gave me. Speaking of which, avoid eye contact with him and Dumbledore as much as possible until you have learned this skill. And even after you've learned it, if you feel a brush against your mental shields, break eye-contact with everyone by looking down."

"All right, I'll read it soon," she agreed.

"Please do me a favor and start tonight. I would prefer you finish the book and have a basic understanding and the ability to do this before you start school. It will be hard for you to learn without someone to test you, but please do your best anyway."

Ginny thought about that for a moment. "All right, Harry, I'll do my best for you. What about having Hermione and Ron learn too? Then we could also use each other to test ourselves with."

He nodded. "Yeah, that would work. Here," he grabbed another book and handed it to her, "you can use this. Please don't lose them; I'd like to have them back."

She saw "Legilimency Explained" on the title of the new book. They looked like they were part of a matching set. "Can you do this?"

"I can do it a little. I found out Moony already knows the basics of Occlumency, which is how the Marauders were able to do so many pranks in school and avoid a lot of trouble. Maybe I can see you on a Hogsmeade weekend and test you?" Harry suggested.

"Yeah, that would work," she agreed and privately thought that was a wonderful idea. Maybe she could spend the most of the day with him. He walked her to the foyer as she thought about that.

Once more, she rose up and kissed his cheek to give him something to think about. "Thanks for everything, Harry." Leaving a stunned Harry, who looked like he had after the previous kiss, she Flooed home.

As Ginny came out of the fireplace, an upset Ron was waiting for her. "Where have you been?!" he all but yelled at her. "You've been flying, haven't you?"

There was no hiding the broom in her hand. "I went to visit a friend, Ron, and yes, I got a few minutes of flying in. No big deal, really."

"You're going to be in so much trouble when I tell Mum."

"And why would you do that?" she asked casually, though the threat caused her stomach to turn a bit.

"Because you know we're not supposed to be flying. Where did you go and who did you see?"

"First of all, Ron, the rule was not 'no flying'; the rule was 'no flying in our paddock'. So I'm good. As to what friend I saw, it's none of your business."

"I'm so telling on you," her brother threatened.

"What, you're going to be a tattletell like you were five years-old again? Really. I think you're only jealous that you didn't think of it first." He huffed but didn't say anything. "Beside, if you're really going to try to get me into trouble, you'll have to say where I went. Otherwise, it's just your word against mine; and my story is that I was merely carrying my broom around as I was about to start packing for school."

Ron snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Well, where do you think I was?"

He was silent for a moment, before he finally said, "I don't know. Mum's clock said you were home, though I couldn't find you here anywhere."

That surprised her. She just left her brother there thinking about that, while she went upstairs to think about it too. Ginny did not get into trouble.

(Fri 30 Aug)

It was nine o'clock on Friday morning, the time the letter had said to be available. With the mirror that had come with the letter in front of him on his desk, he sipped at his tea. While he appeared to be calm on the outside, he really was not on the inside. He had no idea how this conversation was going to go. For a man who made and followed elaborate plans, that was very disconcerting.

The mirror finally vibrated, and a voice came out of it. "Professor Dumbledore?"

Putting his tea down, the Headmaster picked up the mirror that he had already turned on. "Good morning, Harry. To what do I owe the

pleasure of this conversation?" He was going to try his best to win the lad over, or perhaps back over.

"I know I've shocked a few people lately with some of my actions, and I thought you might like to know why and talk about it all," Harry told him, getting straight to the point.

"Actually, I would appreciate that Harry. May I first ask why we're talking with mirrors? I have some very comfortable chairs here in my office, or we could meet at several other secure places."

"True, Headmaster. However, this is actually for your safety. I really should start off this time together with an apology. I'm very sorry for destroying your office a couple of months ago. I hope everything was repairable," Harry said quite sincerely.

"No problem Harry. Everything is as it was before."

"That's good to hear. My thought was that I did not want to run the risk of doing that again. Since this method of communication is secure, I felt this was best." Harry was trying to be polite. He hoped he could continue that way.

"I see. Very well then. Can you please tell me why you ran away?"

"I ran away because I have an important mission, as you know. Were I to have continued down the path you have set up for me, I do not believe I would be successful. Or, if I were to be successful, the price would be so high, I'm not sure I could live with it."

The answer was not totally unexpected, but the wording was. "What was so difficult Harry? I assume this is the heart of your complaint?"

"You could say that Headmaster. When we last talked, you understood what had been happening. As you explained things to me, while I did react, I'm afraid I did not truly understand. But two days of doing nothing but thinking after I was sent to Privet Drive gave me all kinds of insight. Three very important things came out of that time. First, a much better understanding of what is happening around me. Second, a list of problems you have caused that has produced much

pain and suffering on my part, the majority of which I believe could have been avoided. Third, motivation to make some changes in my life."

"I'm sorry you see it that way Harry. Not everything is as it first seems."

"Truer words were never spoken Headmaster, but as you also told me, an old man can forget and make mistakes."

"But Harry, everyone makes mistakes, even you."

Harry wanted to shout about stating the obvious, instead he took deep breath. "Of course we all make mistakes, but we're not talking about everyday things Headmaster. The topic is a war, it's about a plan to win the war. A few mistakes here and there happen. Remember I said that one of the things I ended up with was a list of problems? Let me share my list of twenty-three items with you Professor. Perhaps you'll see me and the war in a different light."

Dumbledore watched Harry in the mirror look to the side and pick up some parchment.

"I should say up front that I believe everything on this list could have either been prevented or the damage could have at least been minimized. I will further point out that the reason an item is on the list is that you were either responsible for it, or you played a large part in the failure."

Dumbledore sat there waiting, he already had an idea how this was going to turn out. Last June was probably a good indicator.

"Let's go somewhat in time order, shall we? First we have the death of my parents."

"Please Harry, we both know Voldemort did that, or if you really want to blame someone, blame Peter Pettigrew."

"You are correct that I can blame Voldemort for almost everything on this list, and that Peter was the main reason my parents were

betrayed. But did you not hear me say you could have prevented or minimized the problems listed? In this case, when my parents did not have you be the secret keeper, why did you not suggest that the person who was to be the keeper show his forearms? Or asked for an oath of loyalty? An Unbreakable Vow not to betray them would not have been too much to ask. That little advice would have been crucial."

Dumbledore said nothing, what could he say as he knew he was going to be found guilty before the trial even started.

"I'll mostly forgive you for that one, as hindsight is 20-20 as they say, but I think you could have done a lot better. More directly related to me was your decision to place me with the Dursleys. What were you thinking? Fine, you didn't want me pampered. The Weasleys would not have, and I bet a number of other Wizarding families would not have either. But no, you sent me to Muggles who wished I'd never been born, abused me, and never showed me an ounce of love. What do you have to say to that Professor?"

"Harry, you know about the blood ward that protected you. In addition, I was rushed at the time. If I hadn't done that, the Ministry of Magic would have taken custody of you and then who knows what would have happened to you. I suspect you would have ended up with a personality like Draco Malfoy."

"Oh please Professor, cut the dramatics," Harry sarcastically told him. "But even if that were true, at least I wouldn't have been abused. As to your first statement, in June, you told me that your top priority was my safety. Yet you also told me you made a number of mistakes because you cared too much for me, like not telling me about the Prophecy when I asked in my first couple of years. So if you really cared about my happiness, then why did you place me with the Dursleys? I'm also left with the question of which you really cared about: safety or happiness? Perhaps it's all clear in your mind, Professor, but I'm confused."

"I was trying for both Harry."

"Well, I'm sorry professor, but I'm going to have to mark you down for a 'D' for Dreadful on that item. Moving along, in my first year, you let Quirrell in the school who had Voldemort on his head. I can't believe you didn't sense him or something that year. Later, you let yourself get lured away from the castle so Quirrell-Voldemort could go after the Philosopher's Stone, and my friends and I ended up suffering for that. Though I must congratulate you on the trick with the mirror; that was stumping Quirrell and Voldemort."

"I thank you for the praise." The Headmaster ignored the rest.

"Don't be too fast to congratulate yourself, because when I was in the hospital wing and asking you questions, you had the perfect chance to tell me about the Prophecy."

"We've already covered that one in June, Harry. I explained you were too young at the time."

"Perhaps, but why didn't you start laying the groundwork. You could have started to give me pieces of it, or given me a children's version of the Prophecy -- but you didn't."

"As you said Harry, hindsight is wonderful."

"I'll move us to my second year and the whole Chamber of Secrets fiasco. Do you realize a twelve year-old girl figured out it was a basilisk slithering around the castle before you did? And what if I'd died fighting the snake or Tom Riddle? Where would the Wizarding World be now? I'll let you off the hook for the pain and suffering to Ginny, though she might not be so kind to you. I believe she still has nightmares about it."

"It was a difficult time for us all."

"My third year was exciting. I can't believe you let Dementors around the students. I almost got killed by them three times. My fourth year was worse. I know there was an unknown Dark Wizard here, but how could you let my name be put into the Goblet of Fire? And to top it off, you made me participate in the bloody tournament. Why didn't you tell me just to sit it out and take zeroes on all the scores? Or start an



event and then immediately give up and take a zero? Because I competed, I had to participate in the ritual that 'resurrected' Voldemort, not to mention watching Cedric Diggory die."

"Harry, as it was explained then, the Goblet of Fire was a magically binding contract."

"You're really not listening. You should have ensured my safety in the contest I should not have been in in the first place, winning was not required. Why didn't you check the trophy to make sure it was 'normal' and not a Portkey to Voldemort? Oh, I know, you entrusted Professor Moody to that job, the same person who was a Death Eater. That's two active Death Eaters you've let teach here."

Dumbledore was uncomfortable with that accusation as he couldn't refute it.

"If it makes you feel better, he was an excellent teacher though. Must have been a bit mixed up in the head to have pulled that off. I mean, teaching Defense well while trying kidnap a student...but I digress. My fifth year was a complete disaster. I really don't understand how you let Umbridge and Fudge run this place and rain holy terror on the students. Besides her unrealistic grasp on the world, she used a Blood Quill on us for which I still have the scars, created the Inquisitorial Squad to terrorize us, sent Dementors to Little Whinging after me, tried to use Veritaserum on me, and almost did a Cruciatus Curse on me."

"You know I had no control over the Ministry and what they did."

"The only reason they sent Umbridge was because you couldn't get a teacher. So much for being the Greatest Wizard of the Age," Harry said with plenty of sarcasm. "Speaking of which, that brings me to my next item. What is it with you in hiring incompetent Defense teachers? There was Quirrell, Lockhart, and Umbridge. We are at war and we students need all the help we can get; so hiring lousy teachers is a really bad idea, and in my opinion, reflects on you."

"I'm sorry you feel that way Harry, but I can only hire teachers that are willing to come here."

"Then you need to make it so they want to come. Please! That should be common sense, Headmaster. Let's see, where am I? Oh yes, number thirteen. Along with hiring incompetent Defense teachers, you knew the Prophecy and what I will have to face. So why haven't you made sure I have as much extra training as I can handle? You've known all along that I am going to need it."

"I wanted you to have a childhood; and there hasn't been the need, you have time."

Harry almost broke the mirror at that statement and would have hexed the old man had he been physically present. He let the old man sit there while Harry tried to calm himself. "That was the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say! What do you think I was doing in the graveyard with Voldemort at the end of my fourth year? Having tea? The point is no one knows when I'll have to fight him, so I must always be ready. It started in my first year here, for goodness sakes. Don't you see a pattern here? I've faced Voldemort in some form every year I've been at school, except for the one year I faced a Death Eater and Dementors."

Albus shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Also in my fifth year, you prevented me from being a prefect. In the larger scheme of things, this isn't that big a deal, but you could have asked me first. Then there's the whole problem of Snape, and don't waste your breath trying to correct me about him being a professor. The title only goes to those who have my respect for being a real teacher. I can't believe you entrusted my Occlumency lessons to that greasy git. While I appreciate your apology for that mistake, it was a pretty obvious mistake considering all the difficulties he's given me over the years, starting from my first day there. Difficulties you've never bothered to correct or prevent. Have you ever sat in on one of his classes with Gryffindors in it? Make yourself invisible and try it sometime, you'll find out that not only does he abuse non-Slytherins, but he doesn't know how to teach either."

"As I have explained before, I have my reasons to trust Professor Snape."

"Fine, trust him with Order business, but he has no business teaching. Every non-Slytherin student hates him for a reason: he's biased, he can't teach, and he enjoys tormenting students. Oops, that's three reasons, but the points stand. Further more, Draco Malfoy has been a bully the entire time he's been here, yet you've never done anything about that. Yeah, I know, you've talked to Snape about it. Yet another indication that Snape shouldn't be here. Do you realize Malfoy made a death threat against me last year? I'm not overly worried about it, but I find that uncalled for and I find it sad that Malfoy's bullying and junior Death Eater behavior isn't taken seriously."

"Harry, if I were to penalize Mr. Malfoy for his bad behavior, as you call it, I would need to do the same to you. Are you really sure you want me to do that?"

"Absolutely. The reason I've received so many detentions over the years is because I've had to react to Malfoy. Take him away and life would be pretty peaceful there at Hogwarts for the entire student body. Crabbe and Goyle aren't angels, but without Malfoy egging them on, they would probably leave most of us alone."

"I don't agree, but I do see your point of view, Harry."

"Also in my fifth year, you waited until far too late to tell me about the Prophecy. If you had told me sooner, like you should have, I would not have gone to the Department of Mysteries. That would have prevented a number of bad things, like my friends getting hurt and Sirius getting killed. Yes, I know you've taken the majority of the blame for that already, but I would really have preferred that Sirius' death have been prevented by you sharing a little information sooner."

"Again, I'm truly sorry Harry."

"If you want sorry, here's sorry for you. While those are most of the events that have gone wrong that you could have prevented or lessened, there are some interesting trends and conclusions on my list. For example, this whole Department of Mysteries disaster and a number of other items can go under a summary item about you

keeping me in the dark on some very useful information. You chose not to share it with me, or chose to wait until the information does me little to no good. Similarly, last year you chose to purposefully distance yourself from me. You weren't neutral like you were to the rest of the students; you purposefully avoided me when I needed someone nearby to help me. Sirius tried, but he couldn't be here. You were here, knew what was going on, yet you avoided me and left me in the dark."

"It had to be that way, Harry." That sounded hollow even to his own ears, but it was the way Albus saw it.

"Yeah, right. Anyway, if that wasn't enough, you kept putting me back with the Dursleys each summer, no matter how much I was hurting. My second summer back, my uncle put bars on my window and locked me in my room, feeding me thru a cat flap. The next summer, when I finally found out I had a godfather, I was not allowed to stay with him, even though that's where my parents wanted me. Summer last year was bad because I watched Cedric die and duel Voldemort. I had to work through that and the horrible nightmares on my own. This summer was even worse for my first week back. There was a reason I laid around not eating for two full days after I returned home. All I could think about was how messed up my life was, and how I'd just lost the closest thing I'd ever had to a parent. So if you don't like my actions this summer, you really only have yourself to blame for putting me in that situation."

"That's not fair Harry. You know you have to go back there because of the blood ward."

"Not true. You sent me back there because it's easiest on you. I'm living somewhere else right now and am just as safe from Death Eaters, and safer physically because I can't be abused by my so-called uncle. Another thing that you've really goofed on, besides not telling me information, is not consulting me on things that affect me directly. Now before you protest that isn't practical, I will admit that to be true at times. When I was one year old, consulting me about the Dursleys would have been a waste of your breath; but asking me about staying there each summer, after I'd started school, would have been useful to you and me. You would have found out they were

systematically starving me, treating me like a slave, as well as occasionally beating me. Checking up on me when I a small child would have been nice too."

Albus sighed deeply, but otherwise kept quiet.

"In the not telling me category, I should also point out, that you have failed to mention everything that is mine. I do appreciate you returning my father's cloak to me, but why didn't you tell me about my family vault? You should have done so a full year ago, and I only found out about it by accident. That leads me to ask: What else you know about, or have, that should come to me?" Harry paused.

After a moment, Dumbledore realized he was supposed to say something. "To the best of knowledge, there is nothing else Harry. I didn't tell you about your family vault because you didn't need it until you graduated here. There is plenty of gold in your school vault."

"Financially speaking, you are correct. However, other things besides gold can be stored in vaults, Headmaster. For example, in the Potter family vault I found a letter from my parents. Financially speaking, it wasn't worth anything at all. But to me, it was priceless to hold and read. I would have loved to have had that a year ago."

The Headmaster chose to keep quiet here too.

"And speaking of love, that brings me to the final item, number twenty-three. You told me last June that love was going to be my greatest weapon against Voldemort, though you couldn't tell me how it would be used. Have you stopped to consider that you're asking me to use a weapon that I'm clueless about? You have put me in a number of situations in life that have denied me the chance to learn to love. I don't know where to even start with it."

"I fully disagree, Harry. You have a great capacity to love."

"And I disagree with that statement. You're are confusing my compassion and caring that people should not suffer, especially as I have suffered. I'll even go so far as to grant you that this is a facet of love." Harry started getting mad. "But one facet does not make a

diamond!" he shouted. He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself so he could go on.

"Now," Harry continued in a mostly normal voice, "despite your failings, the Weasleys have been making a valiant effort to demonstrate love in a family. Sirius tried as parent, or probably more accurately as a favorite uncle. But both of those examples are only a beginning, I'm only just now starting to understand what they are even trying to accomplish. And I am so clueless when it comes to girls, it's not even funny. So tell me Headmaster, wouldn't it have been useful for me to have ten plus more years of experience with this weapon if I'm to accurately use it? Hmm?"

"I see your point of view, Harry," he said wearily.

"Very well, then I hope this makes a difference in your future actions. If not, try putting this conversation in your Pensieve and watching it a few more times," Harry said with some heat. "I respect you as a wizard greatly, your knowledge and magic are exceptional. You're very smart, maybe even borderline genius; then again, maybe that's why the little personal things escape you. You're also a very likeable person, and quite upstanding in your lack of prejudices. However, your track record in planning the war, especially where I'm concerned, is abysmal." As he finished ranting, Harry realized for the first time that he saw himself as an adult, an equal to Albus Dumbledore. That was something to think about later.

"Was there anything else you needed to tell me Harry?"

"No, other than to say that I'll be in touch from time to time, but don't hold your breath, I'll be in training for a while before I start making very many public appearances."

"May I ask who is training you?"

"I have hired Remus Lupin as a private tutor. I have found him to be quite competent in the past, as well as a friend of the family. Since we are discussing school, Headmaster, I would like an answer to my question to you on returning in some future year, should I decide I want to."

"You may return, assuming all normal entrance requirements are observed. The only problem I see you might run into is that we don't admit students with criminal convictions that warrant time in Azkaban. So please be careful to keep a clear legal record. Also, we will probably want to test you to see what year you belong in, but that's for placement only and not an entrance requirement."

"Thank you Headmaster, I don't plan to have any legal problems. There was one other question I asked. Has a decision been made on it?"

"Yes, Harry. It has been decided to accept your generosity and your condition, provided that you notify us immediately of any additions and that you take care as to who you add; but considering your other security comments, that does not sound like it will be a problem."

"No sir, it won't."

"If I may ask, who did you plan to give admittance to?" Dumbledore asked.

"At this time, no one. My thought was that the war may produce people that I care about but have no where safe to live. An example would be if Neville were suddenly without a home, I would grant him access until such a time as he found a permanent home. His access could then be removed."

"I understand Harry. That is very... caring of you. When did you want to change the charm?"

"As soon as possible. We could even do it now if you like," Harry suggested.

Dumbledore thought about that. "That might be for the best. No one should be there now, and this should only take a minute or so. Shall I meet you there?"

"That would be acceptable. Mirror off." Harry's image disappeared.

While it could have been worse, Albus Dumbledore was not pleased. It seemed that no matter what he thought, Harry thought a bridge had been burnt, or at least set on fire. He needed the boy, and the boy needed him, whether he knew it or not. He was going to have to think long and hard about how to repair that relationship. Perhaps a chat with Remus was also in order.

Feeling older than his one hundred fifty-two years, he slowly got up and walked to his fireplace so he could Floo to Headquarters. Not sure where or how Harry would get there, he walked up to the top of the stairs so he could listen for both the Floo and the front door.

As he got to the top, he heard a voice from down the hall. "Do we understand each other now, Mrs. Black? Very good. Do what you want when I'm not here, but when I'm in this house, you will keep quiet or I will remove you."

Albus walked into the foyer and saw Harry standing in front of Mrs. Black's portrait, and Remus Lupin beside him. Harry looked over to him.

"Headmaster," Harry said solemnly.

"Good morning again, Harry. Good morning, Remus."

"Albus. Perhaps we should go into the library, where we have more room?"

"Certainly. Though I might suggest you search the upstairs to make sure no one is here. I have just come from the kitchen and I know that to be clear." Remus nodded and left. Harry searched the rest of the first floor.

When all had returned and found no one else, Albus Dumbledore adjusted the Fidelius Charm protecting number twelve Grimmauld Place, and Harry felt yet another small burden in him. He now felt the secret to this place.



"Thank you, Professor," Harry said very evenly. "I'll let you return to your business. I shall remove all personal contents to relieve you of the burden of having to prevent Mundungus Fletcher's presence."

Albus felt he needed to tread very carefully, so he inclined his head. "Thank you, Harry, that is appreciated. Until next time, good day to you."

After the old man had left, Harry turned to his teacher. "You start at the bottom and work your way up. I'll start in the attic and come down. Box up anything of value, and especially anything personal of Sirius'. We'll meet in the middle. Don't forget to search Kreacher's area. Oh, and all the books in the library come with us too."

Remus agreed and left for the basement.

"Kreacher! Come here," Harry yelled.

The elf popped in and immediately started grumbling. Harry pulled out the Black key to show to Kreacher, as he had shown it to Mrs. Black. "You recognize what this is?" Kreacher instantly stopped grumbling and nodded as Harry put the key back into his cloak. "Very good. It would not be good for you to leave this house, so I will give you two choices. You may either willingly serve me here by keeping this house clean, where you will have plenty of food and rest as needed; or if you feel you can not do that, you may join your ancestors by putting your head on the wall in the stairwell. The choice is up to you. Decide in the next two minutes."

Harry stood there and watched the elf as his eyes swiveled around looking at the house, but they kept coming back to Harry. After nearly a minute of that, the elf started vibrating. As the shaking got so bad Harry thought the little guy was going to fall over, he burst and Harry heard a small thump. Looking down, Harry saw a mess from blood splattered everywhere, and a headless elf body. Deciding that probably was for the best, as much as he hated to see any magical creature die, he pulled out his wand and cleaned up the mess. As he went up the stairs, he noticed that there was indeed one more elf head there.

## Chapter 6: More New Ways

(Sun 1 Sep)

Remus had been unhappy about this when they had discussed it on Friday; he was still unhappy now. It was a bad idea security-wise, but Harry had overridden him. The fact that Harry had a logically sound reason did not bother him; it was the reason that soured him.

"Harry, are you sure..."

"And for the third time this morning: yes, Moony," Harry cut him off as he pulled his black cloak on over his dragonhide coat. He wanted maximum protection when he went out today.

Once Harry had realized he had been seen by others than Ginny and Moony in his coat, he also realized his alter-ego could not be seen in this coat or people would equate him and James York. As he did not want to go out without extra protection, he had also bought a full vest in dragon hide, though brown, for James to wear under his shirts. Not as good as the coat, but helpful enough, considering James was not the target Harry was.

"I know you don't like it," Harry pointed out again, "but even you agreed that Harry Potter needs to be seen to be alive, since he won't be attending school this year. They can speculate what I'm doing all they want, but the public at large needs to see me."

"Yes, yes, I know; but I still don't like it. It's a security nightmare, you know."

"I do know, Remus, but don't worry. I have two different ways to leave, each of which can be activated in two or three seconds at the most. There, I think I'm as ready as I'll ever be. It's half past ten, so let's go. This will give me time to see my friends one last time for quite a while." He strode towards the foyer with Moony behind him. Harry grabbed Moony's arm, and they Apparated to the Apparation spot in King's Cross.

With his black dragon hide coat coming down to just above his knees, and his cloak billowing behind him as he walked, Harry had the amusing thought that Muggles would probably think he was in costume to look like Darth Vader. No breath mask though, just his hair pulled back into a short pony tail at the back, and a thick fringe over his forehead to help hide his scar. For a little extra security later, he wore his glasses today, though they were just plain glass now. He liked his contacts; he felt safer with them.

A few minutes later, he saw Hermione come through the barrier. He was not surprised she was the first. "Need help with your trunk?" he asked her as she started to walk by.

"No thank you, I can... Harry? Harry!" She let go of her trunk and gave him a hug. "I can't believe you came."

He whispered in her ear, "For the ears of you five only, I came to be seen, so people will know I'm alive when word gets out I'm not in school."

She nodded her understanding. "Very smart, I can understand that reason."

"So," he smiled at her. "I see you still have a prefect badge. I assume you're looking forward to sixth year, as usual?"

Hermione laughed. "You know me too well." She lost her smile. "I'm really going to miss you, Harry."

"I'll miss you too, all of you..."

"Hey Hermione!" They both looked and saw Neville coming over. He cocked his head slightly as he peered at Harry for a few seconds. "Harry?"

"Neville, how's it going?"

"Blimey Harry, I didn't recognize you at first. You look so..."

"Grown up?" Hermione supplied after Neville paused.

"Yeah. Nice coat too."

"Thanks! But then, for what I paid for it, it should be nice." They all laughed.

Luna joined them soon, and amazingly, she recognized Harry right away. The Weasleys finally came and Ron did not recognize Harry at first, but that might have been because he was looking at Hermione. Ginny noticed him immediately and gave him a hug.

"Harry! I didn't expect you here, although I'm happy to see you." She was beaming at him too.

As Ginny let go, she stepped off to the side. For reasons unknown to him, Harry kept one arm on top of her shoulders as she moved, and she did not try to stop him.

Ron finally recognized his friend. "Harry, what's up mate?"

"Just dropping by to say hello and good-bye for a while."

Neville looked at him strangely. "What do you mean?"

Harry looked at his friend. "I'm not going to school this year, Neville. I have more important things to do, though I hope to return next year."

"Hey mate, what's with the arm around my sister?"

A look of surprise came over Harry and he looked to his right at his arm resting on Ginny's shoulders. Ginny looked at him with a small smile, but she still made no effort to move. "Don't know, Ron." He was saved from more of an answer by the train whistle blowing to announce its imminent departure.

Harry pulled his arm down and turned to his left. "Neville, mate, take care of yourself." They gripped hands and Harry slapped him on the shoulder too. "I'd like us to get to know one another better, so I may write."

"Yeah, that'd be great. You take care too, Harry."

Moving to the next person in the little circle, Harry gave Luna a small hug. "Take care of yourself, Luna. Good luck on your OWLs."

"Be safe Harry. Don't forget to watch out for the Lizzikins. You know how they like to hang out in the shadows, and their bites can be so nasty," the girl said.

"Thanks for the advice, Luna. I'll watch out." Harry went to Hermione and gave her a hug too. "Take care of yourself, and everyone else too, Hermione. You know you want to."

The bushy brunette blushed, but didn't rise to the baiting. "Work hard so you can come join us soon Harry."

"You know I will. I'll even teach you a few things," he teased her. "Ron," he said to the next person, "watch out for everyone for me, will you?" They also shook hands and gripped each other's shoulders.

"You got it."

"Be sure to watch out for Malfoy. Hex him once for me," Harry joked. His friend laughed. Harry pulled back and turned to the last person.

She surprised him with another hug.

"Take very good care of yourself Ginny. You watch out for Malfoy too. So, can I run down the platform and wave at you as the train leaves?" he asked teasingly.

"Har-ry!" she said as if scandalized as she blushed prettily.

"It's one of my favorite memories of my first year, someone showing me they liked me." She continued to blush, though she did not look away from him. "Hey everyone," Harry called out to the other four. "Ginny is going to continue with the DA. I want you all to help support her."

"Why is Ginny going to do it?" Ron sounded as if he thought he should be the one.

"Because she's willing to put in the extra time to prepare lessons. Are you willing to do that Ron?" Harry asked in an innocent voice. Ron did not answer. "Plus, she has the master coin, unless you want to duel her for it."

Ron shook his head as he said, "That's OK, she can do it."

Harry smiled as he turned back to Ginny. "I know you'll do great with the DA, I'll try to send you pointers and lesson ideas." The train whistle blew two short notes. "Come on, you all better get aboard." Harry helped them get their trunks up on the steps.

Ginny was the last one and the train started moving as she climbed on. Turning around to see her friend one last time for a while, she saw him wave at her. That made her smile and be sad at the same time.

Harry turned to leave as he waved her off. While striding quickly across the platform to avoid the few questions being thrown at him by reporters, he reached into his cloak and grabbed the Manor key, though he kept it under cover. With his other hand, he grabbed his wand. As he reached the barrier to the Muggle side, he touched them together to activate it just before he entered the barrier. To all but one other person there, it appeared that he went through the barrier, though he did not come out the other side.

Seeing no problems, that person Apparated away to a house in Wales. "You got lucky Harry."

"Perhaps," the boy smiled. "Come on in and have lunch before you leave, Moony."

"I really shouldn't," he weakly protested, though he was already following Harry into the house. "What all do you plan to do today?"

"After lunch, I plan to practice my meditation for becoming an Animagus, have a long work out, and probably do a little reading, but

for fun not classes. I'm also thinking about trying to clean the swimming pool and getting it to work."

They had a companionable lunch, and Lupin left Harry to his fun for the rest of the day.

Ginny would have run from the Welcoming feast back to her dorm, but she had to help the first-years get settled since she was a prefect. Hermione and Ron helped too, but it mostly fell to her and Colin Creevey as the fifth year prefects.

Finishing her duties as quickly as she could, she told her friends and brother good-night and hurried up to bed. She changed and crawled in. Pulling her curtains shut, she cast a sticking spell on them and a silencing spell on her bed area for privacy. She had been anticipating being alone since shortly after the Sorting Ceremony. Grabbing her magic mirror, she spoke it's creator's name.

Harry was sitting in a comfortable leather chair in the library in front of the fire. A half empty Butterbeer bottle was on the small table beside him, and a drawing tablet was on his lap. He was tapping a Muggle pencil on his knee as he contemplated several very rough sketches in front of him on the tablet.

The magical mirror on the table next to the Butterbeer started to vibrate. As he had been expecting this to happen, he grinned at it coming true. Grabbing the mirror, he said, "Mirror on. Hello Ginny! What a surprise to hear from you tonight," he teased her.

She smiled and teasingly told him, "Oh shut it, you know you like talking to me."

"Didn't say I don't. So, what was the interesting announcement you called to tell me about?"

A laugh escaped her. "You do know me. Well, you won't believe who the new Defense teacher is this year."

"Hmm," Harry considered the possibilities. "All of our former ones are either out of the teaching business, hired by me, in St. Mungo's, or

dead. So, if I had to guess, I'll ask if the greasy git finally got the job he always wanted."

"Wow! I'm impressed Harry." Then her expression narrowed in suspicion. "Someone told you, didn't they?"

Now Harry laughed. "No, just a lucky guess. If it wasn't him, I would guess Dumbledore would have had to hire someone we hadn't heard of. So, who took his place to teach Potions?"

"Someone we haven't met before named Horace Slughorn. Apparently, he used to be the Potions professor here before, but he retired. The Headmaster must have convinced him to come back," Ginny speculated.

"Interesting -- I'll have to ask Moony about him. Anything else unusual happen?" Harry asked.

"Actually, yes. Guess who our new Quidditch captain is?" Ginny asked with a gleam in her eye.

"I would assume Katie Bell."

"And you would be wrong. McGonagall gave it to Ron! Can you believe it?" She was excited for her brother.

"Good for Ron!" Harry really was happy for him. "I suppose it will be a while before I officially find out though."

"Yeah, although I guess it depends on how soon you write," she commented.

Harry thought about that. "Well, James will be sending you a letter as soon as Zeus gets here. I'll send you and everyone else letters this next weekend. I'll tell Hedwig to wait there and let you send all the letters back with her. Think that will work?"



"Sure Harry, that sounds good. I'll write you a short letter tomorrow, so you'll see Zeus soon." She yawned. "I suppose I should go, it was a tiring day today."

"OK. Oh, did Malfoy give you any trouble on the train?" Harry wanted to keep close tabs on his thorn in the side.

"He stopped by like usual, but he was quite disappointed you weren't there." She giggled. "In fact, I think he left without giving a single insult because he was so distracted by your absense. It was most unlike him."

Harry laughed. "Well, as long as he behaves himself, I won't have to come there and kick his arse to keep him in line. Get some rest, Ginny. You know how to get a hold of me if you need to."

"All right; good-night, Harry."

"Good-night, Ginny. Mirror off."

Harry looked at his drawings for a waterfall he wanted to add to the pool area. None were exactly what he wanted; he'd work on them tomorrow night. Tomorrow was supposed to be filled with a lot of Transfiguration work, or so Moony had told him on Friday.

Ginny put her mirror under her pillow and took down her privacy charms. While she would have preferred Harry being here, this setup was almost ideal. She had ready access to him with letters and the mirror, but he was not here to be chased by other girls. Ginny could slowly work on him to help him understand girls, especially her. Recalling the vision of Harry exercising in just his workout shorts, she drifted off to sleep.

(Mon 2 Sep)

Hermione had just started breakfast when the morning owls came in. One came to her with her Daily Prophet. She eagerly opened it, and almost dropped it onto her plate of food. "Oh my!"

"What?" Ron asked as he continued to heap food onto his plate.

"Harry made the front page. There's even a photo."

Ron tried to grab it to see, but his sister was faster and pulled it to the other side of the table where he could not grab it. There on the bottom of the front page, she saw a picture of Harry standing in front of the train all by himself waving to her. She was not visible because of the angle, but that was the moment the picture had been snapped. The article that went with it was short.

## THE CHOSEN ONE SKIVES SCHOOL

Harry Potter, or the Chosen One, as many have dubbed him, did not return to Hogwarts School of Wizardry and Witchcraft on the first of September with the rest of his classmates. Instead, he stayed on Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  when the Hogwarts Express left, after greeting a small circle of friends.

Why is Harry Potter not going to school this year? What is he doing instead? Fortunately, he has not chosen to abandon the Wizarding World. Does he have some special scheme to save it? Unfortunately, the Chosen One answered no questions asked of him and disappeared quickly after the train left, though no one was sure how he left so quickly.

We shall be watching for more Harry Potter sightings and report them to you as they happen.

"It could have been a lot worse," Ginny commented as she handed the paper back to Hermione.

"Yes, it could have; but some of that speculation was not nice. Harry would never abandon people in need. It's just not in him," Hermione categorically stated.

Ron swallowed, "No, that wouldn't be like him at all, but fortunately, we know better. I'm glad he told us."

The Order meeting, late that evening, had been going for over half an hour, when Albus Dumbledore finished his agenda. "I think that wraps up our normal business. We can go unless someone else has something special to report."

Mad-Eye Moody spoke up. "Nothing overly special other than I saw Harry Potter on Platform 9 ¾ yesterday to see his friends off. Is it true he won't be at Hogwarts this year?"

"Yes, Alastor, that is true," the Headmaster acknowledged. "Harry told me he would not be there this year, that he has other things he feels are more important to work on. I don't agree with that, but I can't do anything about it either."

"Hmm," the ex-Auror grunted. "Do you know why he ran away and what these important things are?"

"Yes I do."

"Would you please share? Given what the Daily Prophet calls him, I'd like to know that we aren't twiddling our thumbs here," Moody expressed.

Dumbledore sighed as he did not really want to get into this, but he seemed to have little choice. Hopefully vague answers would do. "Harry seems to think that he needs to train to work in the war effort." Everyone looked surprised. "To that end, he has hired a private tutor, our own Remus Lupin," Albus held out his hand in that direction and everyone stared, "and Harry seems to think he will be ready do something soon and hopefully return to school next year."

"So he ran away to fight the war his own way? That doesn't make sense, Albus," Minerva McGonagall said.

"That is one of the reasons, Minerva. I will not go into the details, but Harry also seems to blame me for a number of problems in his life, so his running away is his effort to avoid me and have a better life."

Lupin was amazed at how calmly the Headmaster had said that. He'd expected a lot more emotion, but then the Headmaster was also an accomplished Occlumens, so perhaps he was hiding his real feelings.

"That's so like Potter," Severus Snape sneered, "thinking he can do everything on his own."

"While Harry would reveal very few of his plans, I don't think that's true, Severus." Albus told him. "Harry has Remus to help him, and I got the impression, though he didn't say it, that he has other people helping him. He was quite specific that he planned to play a role in this war, and that it would be a narrow one. There will be plenty for the Order to do."

"Remus?" Molly Weasley spoke up. "Can you tell us where he's staying?"

The werewolf smiled. "No Molly, I can't even if I wanted to. He's under a Fidelius Charm. So, rest assured that he is quite safe. He's eating well, is not bored, and is not getting into trouble. Well, not too much. I advised him not to meet the Hogwarts Express yesterday, but he did have a good reason to do so. Other than the potential security problem, I agreed with his reasoning; and based on the Daily Prophet article this morning, it's easy to see that Harry did the right thing. A public panic could ensue if Harry were perceived to be gone."

There were no more questions, so Dumbledore said, "I think that concludes this meeting. Everyone, have a safe journey home. Remus, could you spare a few minutes for me?"

As everyone filed out, Remus followed the Headmaster into the house library. It was not hard to guess what this conversation was going to be about. Lupin had heard the entire conversation with Dumbledore, as he had been in the room when Harry had made the mirror call. Though Harry had shared a few of the items before with him, Remus was shocked as he heard the full list a few days ago.

Dumbledore put up privacy wards then turned to the last of the true Marauders. "Remus, can you tell me anything else about Harry and his decisions lately?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't. It is Harry's decision on what information to share with you about himself. Though I will add that it was a good thing you were talking to him by a mirror. I truly believe that one of

your comments would have gotten you, and not your office, hexed." Lupin looked at his former professor as the older man evaluated him and his answer, then he felt a mild brush against his mental shields.

"Enough!" Lupin shouted as he looked away. "If you want to know yet another reason Harry does not trust you, you've just demonstrated it. Good-night!" The werewolf unlocked the door to the room and angrily strode out. He did not plan to tell Harry about this, but he felt he understood some of Harry's misgivings a little more clearly now.

Albus sank into a chair. He realized he had just made a foolish mistake, just as he realized it was his desperation that had driven him to do that. Alas, he may have just set fire to another bridge. He now had another relationship to repair. Perhaps Harry had a very small point. Albus wondered if he did assume too much and tried to be in control a little too often. He was going to have to think about that.

(Fri 13 Sep)

It was seven in the morning, bloody early for this sort of task, but Harry did not have a choice in the matter. He was to meet a third person to test him, and this was the only time that could be worked out. As Remus' role was known within the Order now, it was much easier for him to convince the person to come.

Harry waited Disillusioned in a field only about twenty miles from Potter Manor. For the average person, there was no reason to connect this place with him though. After only a ten minute wait, Remus and Kingsley Shacklebolt appeared. Harry cancelled the Disillusionment charm.

"Good morning, Kingsley," he greeted the tall, dark, bald man. Harry was not sure what it was, but there was something about Kingsley he had always liked. Harry thought it was his professionalism, but the man was special. Of course, his help in Dumbledore's office during the trouble with Marietta Edgecombe definitely endeared the man to Harry.

"Morning, Harry. Remus tells me you'd like some help in your training."

"Yes, Sir. You have a reputation as a good dueler, so I'd like to test myself, if you don't mind."

Shacklebolt smiled. "Ah, the young upstart trying to prove himself." Harry returned the smile. "How did you want to do this?"

"Ten basic duels, nothing too damaging please. I've been taught to heal most injuries as long as I don't have to use potions or work too fast."

"Ah, much like Auror School. Who else besides Remus have you trained with?" Kingsley was curious.

"Only him for training. I dueled Tonks six weeks ago and Mad-Eye four weeks ago, as I'm about to do with you," Harry admitted.

"Oh? How did you do?"

Harry grinned. "I held my own reasonably well. I'll tell you afterwards." Harry shrugged out of his cloak. He was not wearing his dragon hide coat, as he wanted to make it fair for the Auror, though the coat did slow him down just slightly with its stiffness.

Kingsley adapted the stance. Harry did as well and bowed. Remus said, "Begin."

An hour and a half later, Harry was healing a simple fracture in his lower left leg, while Kingsley was letting Remus heal a deep cut in his wand arm. "Nice one with the cutting spell in the last duel Harry. I thought I had you for sure."

The young man grinned as he finished the healing and pain went away. "I wondered for a few seconds too, but you made the mistake of letting up. That gave me my sixth win."

"No need to rub it in Harry," the Auror told him mostly good naturedly, though there was some hurt pride. "I can't believe how fast you are. I lost count of the number of times I thought I had you, but you dodged out of the way."

Harry laughed. "That's because Remus has been merciless in drilling me on speed and agility. Sometimes he even takes my wand away and makes me do dodging exercises to avoid getting hit with mild hexes."

Kingsley looked thoughtful. "That's a good strategy. Perhaps we should introduce that into Auror school. What else do you do for training?"

"I also do weight training for strength, and running for endurance training. I've also been learning a lot of spells and different ways to use them. Whatever Remus can come up with. I think he's also been asking around to others for ideas too." Harry looked at his teacher.

"Yes, that I have. I'm not against stealing good ideas." They all chuckled at that.

"Well, Harry, I'm impressed. If you don't mind me asking, what part do you see yourself playing in the war? Albus was very vague when he mentioned he had talked to you a few weeks ago." Kingsley had a serious, yet casual expression about him.

Harry evaluated the Auror for a moment. The more he talked to the Auror, the more Harry liked him. "I'm afraid I can't answer that at this time, but I might in the future." He looked at Remus, then back to Kingsley. "Kingsley, I have a question for you. Do you trust me?"

That surprised the man. "Trust comes in many forms. How do you mean that?"

"I mean, do you trust me to do the right thing? Most of the time at least." He added a small smile. "If we were out together and something happened, would you trust me with your life?"

All casualness left Shacklebolt. "What are you after Harry?"

"I want to trust you, but I don't know if I should because I don't know if you trust me." Harry held the man's gaze and tried to measure him.

"Surprisingly, I do trust you Harry. You're green, but that's because you're sixteen. In a fight, I'd stand back-to-back with you any day," Kingsley said with conviction.

The solemn statement hung in the air for a moment. "Do you think there is a difference between trust and absolute trust?" Harry asked just as solemnly.

Remus watched the two stare at each other, and finally figured out where Harry was going with this. He hoped Harry was doing the right thing.

"The difference is time and experience. Why?" the bald man asked.

Harry used the same answer as he did with Remus. "Because, I would like you to join my small circle of advisors. Unfortunately, trust is not good enough; I need absolute trust, and I need it immediately. I don't have the luxury of time for us to gain experience with each other. Does that make sense?"

"It does and that's very interesting. Why me?"

"Because I respect you. I'm also told you're one of the best fighters on the side of the light. Having someone who understands the Ministry and can advise me on laws is an added bonus. And I don't know what it is, but I also happen to like you. Would you join me to help train me, advise me, and stand by me as needed?"

Kingsley evaluated him for a few long moments. "How much time are we talking about?"

"For you? A few hours here and there throughout the week; plus a single four to eight hour block on the weekend, if you're available. Remus will still do most of my training, but I believe you can teach me other things. Your style of dueling gave me fits, even though I did beat you six to four." Harry grinned at that admission.

Shacklebolt laughed. "I could do that. I could also teach you a few basic self-defense moves that would be helpful, too. I won't try to make you a master, but a couple dozen moves on how to fight with



your hands and feet will take you a long way." He paused as he tried to figure out what to do. "What about your other question on trust? You must have asked that for a reason; you've had good reasons for everything else."

"Yes, I do have one," Harry admitted, before he threw down the proverbial gauntlet. "To get absolute trust immediately, I would require an Unbreakable Vow to keep my secrets and to act in my best interest. The last part is a bit vague to give you some flexibility, it's also there to make sure you don't turn against me and become a Death Eater, even inadvertently."

The Auror's left eyebrow climbed high. "You don't do anything by halves, do you Harry?"

"No," the young man said softly. "I'm sorry to have to ask that, but I will say it will be temporary. I will remove it one day."

After nearly a full minute of thinking, Kingsley held out his hand. "I'm willing Harry. I don't fully know why, but I do fully trust you." Harry performed the Unbreakable Vow.

"Thank you, Kingsley. Your trust in me means a lot. Do you have a few more minutes?"

"I have to be somewhere in half an hour, so only a few minutes."

"Good enough. We'll have to work out some method of communication, but that can wait. Harry pulled out his Manor key. This is one of my secrets. Please grab onto my arm and I'll Portkey us there. Remus can Apparate," Harry explained.

"Shouldn't I be touching the Portkey too?"

"No," Harry said wryly. "Remus found out the hard way that is not a good thing. The results are a bit shocking." Remus snorted. "But by holding my arm, you will go with me. 'Harry Potter's Safe House is Potter Manor House on Potter Estates in Wales.' Got that?" Kingsley nodded. "Good, think about that carefully." A few seconds later, Harry touched his wand to the Manor key and they left the field.

Arriving in the Manor foyer, Kingsley was impressed. "I'll add you to the access list for Apparation and the Floo network. If you must Floo here, use the destination of 'Potter Manor in Wales'. Let's go in, I'll show you a couple of rooms before you go."

Harry showed him the library, the Dueling Room, and the exercise room.

Shacklebolt had admiration in his voice. "I'm not sure what I can do for you Harry. This is all very impressive. The dueling dummies Remus created look very interesting. I can't wait to try them out, as well as see what you can do against them."

"As I said, I need dueling help and advice mostly. There is one more thing I'm looking for that Remus has not been able to find. I need to find someone who can teach me advanced Occlumency. Do you know of anyone?" Harry was hoping for a positive answer, he was not disappointed.

"I do know of someone Harry, but the question is if he will train you. I'll ask. Can I mention your name?"

That was a tough one for Harry. "I'd prefer you do not, but I suppose you can if he seems close to saying yes. If he gives you a firm no to taking on a student, then I'd prefer you didn't. Also, any reasonable price for his tutoring is agreeable to me. I don't want to be taken advantage of, but I can afford to pay him for what his time is worth."

"Fair enough Harry, I'll see what I can arrange."

"Kingsley, can you come by tomorrow for a few hours? I'd like to discuss this and other matters with you in more depth."

Kingsley Shacklebolt nodded. "I'll be here at six."

"I'll even provide dinner tomorrow evening," Harry told him with a smile. The Auror nodded and left for the office to do some paperwork for a few hours.

Remus looked at his student. "That was very interesting. I'm surprised you added him to your inner circle."

Harry shrugged. "Everything I told him was true. There is something about him I like, and I believe that one of the few things I'm good at is judging people's character, at least after I've had some time with them. Say, since you're going to have three days off next week due to the full moon, can I get you to be here tomorrow evening?"

"Sure Harry, want a talk with both of us?"

"Yeah. I wish I could get Ginny here too. Well, I could if I really had to, but she already knows what we need to talk about, so I guess it's not that big a deal." Harry was thinking out loud and still looked lost in thought.

"Miss her?" Lupin asked with a straight face.

"Yes," Harry answered absentmindedly, not fully thinking about what he was saying. He missed Moony's smile. Snapping back to reality, he looked over at his teacher. "Well, I think we should start on today's work. Animagus meditation as usual?"

"Right, Harry."

They went to the library where Lupin sat down at a study table to go over his lessons for the rest of the day. Harry took a chair by the fireplace and out of sight from his teacher.

Just before the end of the practice hour, Harry's legs changed. He'd been working on them the entire time, as he felt they would be easiest. Grinning as if it was Christmas morning he looked down and liked what he saw. Concentrating hard, he changed them back. After doing the change three more times, he quit and got up to find his teacher.

"How's it coming Harry?"

"Good, I think I'm getting closer. I'm hoping to do the complete transformation by Christmas."

"Hold on Harry, that's very ambitious. Most people take a year to learn this, and your father took two years."

"Yeah, but you told me they didn't have an instructor either."

Moony smiled. "True, and I'm not a real instructor for this skill. If you had Minerva McGonagall helping you, I think you'd be done a lot faster. I've never done this, so I consider you to be doing this on your own as your father did."

"I understand, Moony, but I still feel it won't be long. Things are starting to feel right. There's something else there too. It's like I can feel my magic or something. It's hard to describe," Harry said with some confusion on his face.

"You may be correct," Lupin theorized. "As you are essentially doing wandless magic with this transformation, you should feel a connection to your magic. In fact, if you can do this, we should try doing some wandless magic work and see if you can pick it up. That would be extremely helpful to you, should you ever lose your wand, or have it taken away from you."

They started the rest of their lessons for the day. Harry could not wait until the evening. When he was on his own, he would work on the Animagus transformation some more, as well as try some wandless magic to see if he could get it to work.

## Chapter 7: Freed

(Sat 14 Sep)

Kingsley and Remus arrived at Potter Manor within only a few minutes of each other. Harry had a dinner of steak and kidney pie ready for them.

"You know," Harry told them as they started eating, "one of the great things about living on your own is you can eat whatever you want."

"And in whatever order you want, too," Lupin added mischievously. "There have been times I've started with dessert." They all laughed at that.

Harry looked at the newest member of his inner circle. "Any news on finding me a teacher for Occlumency?"

Kingsley smiled. "Actually yes. In fact, he's to meet me at my house at eight tonight. Want to meet him?"

Surprise at Kingsley's swiftness momentarily silenced Harry. "Uh, yeah. I'm impressed with how fast you did that."

"Got lucky really. He just happened to have tonight free. He's a mind healer and one of the best at Occlumency -- right up there with Dumbledore. I think you'll like him."

"Thanks, Kingsley." Harry ate a few more bites as he considered something. He didn't want to do this, but the nagging thought would not leave him alone. "Kingsley, do you really trust him? Can I trust him? I have a number of things that must be kept to myself for now."

"I understand, Harry," the Auror told him. "He is a mind healer, so he must keep confidential information about patients to himself. Also, he does a lot of work with us in the MLE, so he's used to working with Aurors and their secrets. I trust him, and I'll be there with you. He also taught me Occlumency; I'm not a master at it, but I can defend myself."

Harry considered that. What choice did he really have? And he did trust Kingsley. "Very well. Perhaps we should have dessert while I tell you the main reason I asked you over." Winky had prepared a chocolate cake for them, which Harry served.

"I believe you both know of the Prophecy which you guarded last year and also fought alongside me to protect in June?" He got two nods. "The reason I now have a different way of looking at life is because of it. Dumbledore showed it to me after the fight." Harry then quoted the Prophecy.

While not totally stunned, his two guests were still surprised. "That's why your parents went into hiding, wasn't it?" Moony asked.

"Yes, and it's why I'm in hiding and training now."

"Your actions make so much more sense with this information, though I did suspect it after the Daily Prophet started calling you the Chosen One," Kingsley told him. "Of course, anyone with a brain doesn't believe everything written in the Daily Prophet." Grins were shared on that observation.

"So you know, Kingsley, Ginny Weasley is the other member of my inner circle, and she knows this too. You can talk with her about any of this." The man nodded.

Shifting topics slightly to avoid a depressing mood, Harry suggested, "Why don't we go see the Dueling Room. I know you wanted to check that out closer the other day." He rose and led them to the other room.

When they entered the Dueling Room, Kingsley walked up to the dozen "people" in a corner of the room. "So, exactly what are they and how do they work?"

Remus explained his creation. "Originally, I got a mannequin from a Muggle department store so it would look like a person, but since we destroy them so quickly, I just conjure them now. All they really needed were some specialized animation spells. The hard part was getting them to attack in a semi-intelligent manner, but since most Death Eaters are only semi-intelligent, it works out pretty well."

Kingsley let his deep laugh out at that. "I assume you did this so you can use more realistic offensive spells and not hurt anyone?" He got an affirmative nod. "So you just start them up and have a fight?"

"Almost," Remus answered. "They have three settings: low, medium, and high, though Harry wants me to add a harder setting. That determines how aggressive they are, what spells they use, and how fast they fire them. There's an extra option that also allows them to fire Unforgivables."

Despite his complexion, Shacklebolt paled. "What?!"

"No!" Harry interrupted and also chuckled at his new friend's reaction. "Not the real Unforgivables, just representations of them." The Auror looked very much relieved. "In fact, the only spell it knows how to fire is a Coloring charm. The color that appears on you tells you what you got hit with. Getting hit with a green dot is very bad, as that represents the Killing Curse."

"I see. Can I try one?" Kingsley asked.

"Sure, step on up and get ready. It will just take a few seconds." Remus walked up to a dueling dummy, pointed his wand at it, and sent the final animation spell. "I've set it for medium and it will do Unforgivables. You've got about fifteen seconds." He and Harry walked over to the area near the door. There was a small shielded spot there for an observer.

The dummy came to life and started going after Kingsley. The Auror conjured a shield and started firing real hexes. A little less than a minute later, the dummy was in three pieces after a Bludgeoning Hex.

"Not bad," Harry complemented him. "But this purple dot here on your left leg?" Shacklebolt looked down, his expression made it obvious he was not aware he had been hit. "That's a Cutting Curse, not good." The young man grinned. "Otherwise, nice job dodging all the green spells."

"Thanks. Nice work out, and yeah, that was about like fighting the average Death Eater grunt," Kingsley commented.

"How about one more try?" Harry asked mischievously. He walked up to a dummy and did the final spell to activate the next dummy. "I think you'll find this to be like fighting Bellatrix or someone like that." Harry walked back to the shield area.

This time Kingsley had his hands full. A little before the two minute mark, Remus shouted "Stop!" The dummy followed the command and stood there.

A panting Kingsley turned to look at them and Harry pointed to the man's right shoulder. Looking down, the Auror saw a green dot there. "Whoops!"

Harry laughed, "Yeah, I guess that's one way to put it. Have a rest over here with Remus." The two traded places. In addition to the dummy that was suspended, Harry went over activated a second one. "I set this one for medium." He got ready then shouted, "Begin!" Both dummies started coming after him.

Shacklebolt was amazed at what he saw. Harry never stood still and was consistently hitting the dummies with various spells. It took him just over a minute of very hard work before those two dummies were lying in pieces.

"Now you see why we just conjure them," Remus remarked to their new friend.

As Harry turned around, Kingsley noticed there was not a single colored dot on him. "That was very impressive Harry."

"Thanks! My present goal is to do two hard ones or five medium ones at the same time." Harry put his wand up. "We should probably go, it's nearing eight. Moony, I'll see you Thursday, right?"

"Yes, Harry. Please work on the lessons I've left for you." The werewolf then added, "Plus anything Kingsley thinks you should." Kingsley laughed at that.



They all walked to the foyer and went their separate ways.

As Harry Flooed into Kingsley's house a couple of minutes after his friend, he was a bit surprised. He knew Kingsley was not married, as nearly half of all the Aurors were not, but the house was nicely decorated and very clean. Not a state that Harry's house would have been in if he had not had house elves.

"Welcome to my humble home Harry. While I'm not under a Fidelius here, it is unplottable and the Floo has an access list which I adjusted to add you. Would you like something to drink? A Butterbeer perhaps?"

Harry took the drink. He had barely started on it when there was a knock on the front door. Kingsley answered it with his wand in his hand, but his wand was put up after he opened the door. "Paul, come in." A man of around sixty with a full head of sandy-reddish hair came through the door. "Paul, meet Harry Potter, Harry meet Healer Paul MacDonald."

"Mr. Potter, a pleasure."

"Healer MacDonald, thank you for seeing me."

"Not a problem, well, not too big of one," the healer said with a smile. "I don't teach very many, but this is a case where fame has its uses, as I was curious to meet you. Kingsley also said you'd had a few problems with Occlumency in the past, so that intrigued me even more." Harry blushed slightly from embarrassment.

"Harry, Paul is probably one of only about a handful of experts in all of Great Britain, so I think he can help you if no one else can. Why don't we all have a seat?" Kingsley led them to the living room.

"Mr. Potter... "

"Please call me Harry, everyone else does."

"As you wish, Harry. Can you please tell me about your past experiences with Occlumency? I assume Albus Dumbledore was your teacher? He is one of the few other experts."

"Actually, Professor Dumbledore had another professor try to teach me, Severus Snape."

"Snape, hmm, I think I've heard of him somewhere. A reformed Death Eater, isn't he?"

"Yes sir," Harry answered. "He tried to teach me, but we have never got along very well and the lessons did not go very well either. To be honest, I'm not totally sure he was really trying to teach me. I think I've learned most of the basics better from a book this summer."

"Well, he has not come to my attention for this craft, but that doesn't mean he can't perform Occlumency. Please tell me why you want to learn this, and why you think you have problems." The healer was very patient and calm in his questioning, which Harry appreciated.

"I seem to have a connection of some sort to Voldemort," Harry admitted. The healer made no reaction to the name. "At times, he can send me feelings and pain, and even the occasional dream. It was Professor Dumbledore's idea that Occlumency could help block that. But with what I've learned so far, my blocking seems to do little good. So either I'm not doing it correctly, or Occlumency is not the right skill to stop the connection, or maybe the connection can not be stopped by any means; we really don't know. Of course, even if this is not the right skill to block the connection, it's still a very useful skill to protect your secrets."

The healer looked very thoughtful after the explanation. "May I examine your scar? That is where the connection comes from, I assume?"

"Yes sir, we believe so." Harry pulled his fringe back as the healer walked over.

Pulling out his wand, he started doing various diagnostics on the young man. To Harry's surprise, he did the same spell several times,

and from several angles. The healer put his wand away and then touched Harry's forehead around the scar. "Do you have any pain here?" Harry told him no. "Or here," the healer pressed on the center of the scar.

"Maybe a little when you press there. I almost always have a dull ache there, from the connection I would assume. I've just sort of learned to live with it." Harry looked up at the healer.

MacDonald pulled his wand back out and did one more spell. This time Harry cried out and grasped his forehead. The healer immediately stopped and reached down to try to steady the young man. "I'm very sorry Harry. Are you all right now?"

Harry wiped tears from his eyes. "Mostly. That felt like it gets when Voldemort is very angry. What did you do?"

"It was a more active diagnostic spell. I was essentially pushing my magic into that area. Harry, this is going to sound crazy, but I think you have something in your scar that gives you problems." Harry did look amazed; the healer continued. "If you want, I think I can help you by removing it, but that will mean you'll also lose your scar."

"I don't understand. What's there?"

"It's hard to explain, but I believe you have a 'piece of magic' embedded in your scar. It might be helpful to think of it like a tumor, or perhaps a splinter. I can remove it, but I'll have to remove the scar and some of the underlying flesh. When I get done, I can build it back up, grow new skin, and it will appear normal to you. You should also no longer have the connection, I think."

"You think?"

"I'm not one hundred percent certain, but I'm mostly certain. Still, you have to decide if you want this done." The healer looked at him, waiting on Harry's decision.

Harry thought about the choice given to him. There were plenty of times he would have loved to have not had his scar. Yet, when given

the chance to have it removed, he was not totally sure he wanted to. It was his identifying mark. The other thing that came to mind was the line from the Prophecy, "marked him as his equal". If he lost the mark, would he still be capable of defeating the Dark Lord? After a moment, Harry decided that to mark something meant to indicate, so he should still have the power. The thought of losing the connection and pain was very appealing.

"OK, I'll let you. When can we do it?" Harry's mind was made up.

"Right now if you want. It shouldn't take me more than about ten minutes. Kingsley, can we borrow your dining table?"

"Ah, sure, right this way." Shacklebolt led them into the dining room.

"If you'll lie on the table please Harry. Kingsley, you'll need your wand. I'll need a beam of light about six inches in diameter on Harry's forehead." They all moved into position.

The healer loosened the top button of his shirt to make himself a little more comfortable and pulled his wand back out. "Now Harry, I'm going to talk a bit while I do this so you'll know what's happening. I'll numb your forehead before I start working. In theory, you should feel nothing, at least if this was all normal. But, with a magical connection, I expect you to feel something. I'm very sorry, but I can't numb that. Even if I put you to sleep, you'd have the equivalent of a nightmare, and I'd prefer you were awake so you can tell me how you feel. Understand?"

"Yes sir."

The healer started his work. "All right, I'm numbing your forehead -- there. Now I'm going to clean the skin, then cut around your scar. I'll try to make the cut as small as possible, but I also need to make sure I get it all. Now for the hard part Harry. If you need to, take deep breaths and pant, but please try to keep your head as still as possible."

"I understand." So far, Harry had felt nothing after the numbing. That suddenly changed. "Ah!"

"Stay still Harry. I'm trying to work fast, but the connection does not want to let go. Need to go a little deeper. Kingsley, grab that cloth there with your other hand and hold it to the side to stop the blood from running everywhere."

Kingsley complied as he watched the healer grab the end of the skin he was trying to remove and lift, while also attempting to cut and scoop it off with a spell from his wand. He was only able to stay on his feet and watch because of all the other messes he'd see as an Auror. Finally, he saw the one inch by four inch strip of flesh being pulled off and set on the table. Harry also instantly quieted.

"Now how do you feel Harry?" the healer asked.

"When my panic goes away, I'll tell you," Harry said with a pant. A moment later, he got a happy look on his face. "Hey, the ache is gone."

"Excellent Harry! Hold still for awhile longer while I regrow the flesh and the skin." The healer pulled out a couple of potions and dripped a little on Harry's forehead, then he did a few spells. "There, that will take care of most of it. I'll wrap a bandage around it to protect it. Please leave this on until tomorrow morning. You may take it off then. Also, please be very careful not to bump your forehead for a few days. Take it easy and you'll be just like new." He pulled Harry up so he sat on the table.

"Thanks Healer MacDonald! After this, I bet becoming proficient with Occlumency will be easy," he said with a large grin.

MacDonald laughed. "Hopefully. How about we meet once a week? I'll arrange something with Kingsley here since he can contact you. It will have to be random nights during the week. My schedule is always so erratic."

"Whatever works well for you. My evenings are almost always free." Harry was still reveling in being pain-free. He could hardly wait to tell a certain friend. "Thanks again for this!" He shook the healer's hand.

He pulled out his wand and Vanished the offensive flesh that had been removed. "Don't want that going anywhere."

The healer laughed. "Right. I'll see you next week then. And Harry? Since we're to be working so closely together for a while, you can call me Paul."

"Thanks again -- Paul. By the way, what do I owe you for tonight and the lessons? Kingsley never told me what he'd arranged for the tutoring."

"Don't worry about it, Harry. Consider it my contribution to the war effort." With that, the healer left.

"I think you made a good impression him Harry. He doesn't teach many," Kingsley commented.

Harry smiled. "And I believe I owe a lot of that to you. Thanks, Kingsley!"

"No problem Harry. Just looking out for your best interests." They both laughed and Harry went home.

Ginny was sitting on her bed rereading James' letter. She'd barely had any free time by herself today, and when she thought she had a moment during lunch, Ron had come in and grabbed the letter, to her dismay. Interestingly, Ron asked her why she was looking at a blank parchment. That was when she understood why Harry had sent her the little friendship ring she was wearing on her right pinky. At first she had thought the ring had meant something really special, even though Harry had stated it was for her protection. Now she understood, it protected her and him by making it so only she could read the letter while wearing the ring. The threat of a Bat Bogey hex got her letter back.

Ron had started being a real prat lately. He'd taken Harry's encouragement to protect everyone to new levels, and he was "concerned" about this lost friend suddenly starting to write to her. Ron barely remembered James York even existed. Her cover story was holding though. On the other hand, Hermione was intrigued by

an old friend finding Ginny and writing her. She seemed to find it romantic, as did the rest of her dorm mates when they heard about it.

Another interesting complication in her life recently was a pair of boys. Dean Thomas and Terry Boot were both trying to get her attention. It was amusing in a way, especially when the two would try at the same time and see the other. Ginny did her best to be friendly and leave it at that. She had someone else she was trying to catch.

To make life even harder, she'd noticed the other day that Colin was also starting to look at her differently. She had not decided if he was merely concerned about her new pen pal like Ron was, or if he was like Dean and Terry and wanted more than friendship. If it was not for her desire for Harry, and Harry starting to respond, she would have found the whole situation of being desired by so many boys to be very enjoyable. As it was, it was almost annoying.

Picking the letter back up again, she started reading.

Dear Ginny,

I've had a really amazing day today. I dueled Kingsley and beat him 6 duels to 4. Considering how good he is, I'm feeling really psyched (did I spell that right?). Anyway, something else happened today too. After the duels, we were talking and things just "clicked". I've always liked Kingsley, he was really cool in Dumbledore's office that one time too. But today, it was like we were old friends or something, so I asked him to help me out and he accepted. So I have three of you in my inner circle now!

If that wasn't good enough, he knows someone who can teach me Occlumency. Don't know if he will, but he's going to ask for me. I really hope he says yes. I really need to learn that well. I hope you have been practicing your lessons. I'm glad you think you have the basics down and that Hermione is helping you. It's too bad Ron is being a prat and is not doing it too. I think this skill would help him be calmer in general.

Hey, remember me talking to the twins at your party? I'm supposed to start Potions work with them next week. I'll stop by and let them tutor

me for an hour or three, and then I'll help them make some things for their shop as payment. Considering what all they've done and how bad a teacher Snape was, they have to be better. If nothing else, they'll certainly be a lot more entertaining.

Have you heard when the Quidditch games are? I know former students come to them sometimes, so I thought I could come see you. That way your friends will know that I'm real. Ha-ha. I will probably need to change my face slightly. If you have any suggestions, let me know.

I hope things are otherwise going well. Do study hard for your OWLs, but don't stress over them. They really aren't as hard as all the teachers make them out to be. And of course, you know not to listen to Hermione on this. Right? Otherwise, you'll turn into a basket case and I can't have my best friend like that.

Keep the letters coming. I think Zeus likes visiting. I wonder if something is happening between your owl and my owl? That's kind of funny to think about.

Take very good care of yourself,  
James

Ginny smiled to herself. He wanted to come visit her, and he called her his best friend. She thought that she might be making progress with him. She supposed that if he really came here, she would find out for sure. She started day-dreaming about what that might be like before she started to write him back.

Her mirror vibrated and broke her out of her reverie. She quickly cast a privacy charm around the bed area. Her curtains were already closed.

"Mirror on. Hi Harry! This is unexpected." In fact, she was trying to remember if he had ever called her before.

"Guess what happened to me tonight?"

"Uh, from your letter I'll say that you're now an Occlumency expert."



"No," he laughed, "but something almost as good. See anything different about me?"

She looked at his image in the mirror carefully. "Besides the bandage on your head?"

"Oh, damn! I forgot that was there. Well, you can't see it then. Can you believe I got my scar removed?"

"You what?! Harry, why did you do that?"

"What? Was that bad?"

How did she answer this? It was so sudden. "Well, no, it's just a surprise. So, why?"

"Well, the tutor I went to tonight was also a mind healer. And he looked at my scar and said something was there, like a magic tumor or something. So he removed it and then regrew my skin and everything. I'll be normal!" He was excited.

Now she understood. He had never liked standing out, and his scar had done that to him. "Then I'm happy for you Harry. I can't wait to see it."

"The best part is that it seems to have removed the connection I had to Voldemort. My ache is gone, and when I tried to feel him, I couldn't at all. Whoo-hoo!" he shouted.

Ginny laughed at his exuberance. "Then I'm really happy for you. I know how much you had trouble with that."

"Yeah, I can't wait to show you. So, when are the Quidditch games? I'll come to watch you, and during the other match, we can sit together and watch the game."

She glowed on the inside. He wanted to spend time with her. "Well, I was just about to write and tell you. So you'll have to wait until

tomorrow for the letter, or I shall have nothing to write about." That wasn't totally true, but she enjoyed teasing him.

"So, I'm willing to share my good news with you, but you won't share with me? That's not fair you know." He dared her with a look.

Ginny rejected the dare. "Good try, Potter. But you'll find out tomorrow, well, tomorrow night probably, as I won't be able to get to the Owlery until tomorrow morning."

"Grr!"

She liked his playful response, and thought that maybe she was making better progress than she first thought.

"Tomorrow, Harry. Now let me go or I won't get this written until tomorrow night, then you'll have to wait extra day."

"Grr!" he again playfully told her.

"Sweet dreams, Harry!"

"Night, Ginny; take very good care of yourself. Mirror off."

"Mirror off." She laid the device down. After hearing it, she realized he always told her to 'take very good care', but everyone else was told to 'take care'. She hoped that was purposeful and meant something. Pulling out some parchment, along with a quill and ink, she began to write.

Dear Harry,

This was a day of several firsts. We had our first DA session today. I had to get a sponsor, so I talked to McGonagall. She liked the idea of me continuing the extra instruction. She also let Hermione create another magical contract for us. It says the signer swears he is not a Death Eater and will not become one. She wouldn't tell me what the punishment was for breaking that, but she said it was worse than last year's version. I think we'll have a good group. Your lessons from last year and pointers for this year were very helpful. I also really

appreciate the letter you gave me to read to the group telling them that you wanted me to be the leader. That helped a number of people.

We also had our first Quidditch practice today. I miss you so much, let me tell you. I'm still Seeker because there's no one else who can do it. So you have to come back soon Harry. A Chaser position is calling me. Ha-ha. And I'll never be able to do the Wronski Feint like you. The Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff game is the 19th of October. Our game with the Slytherins is on the 26th. I hope you can make it. It will be good to see you again, and it will be really fun to show everyone who doubts me that yes, you are real. Start thinking about your personality and how you plan to act, because you can't act like Harry. Maybe you should try to be very outgoing. Good idea on changing your face. Of course, no scar (that is so cool) will help, but you do need to do more. Maybe you should try something with the cheekbones.

She thought about mentioning Terry and Dean giving her looks, but decided not to. Harry did not need that pressure and things seemed to be going nicely as is. She had seen what could happen with Harry when Cho Chang played the jealousy card last year in Hogsmeade. If it had not hurt Harry's feelings, it would have been a funny story. No, Harry had not reacted well.

Ron is being very interesting this year. He's alternating between growing up and being a real git. One minute everything is going well, he's reasonable and actually uses his brain. The next minute he's acting the protective brother and is getting all hot and bothered that I have a pen pal who's a boy. It's really funny: he has only the vaguest memories of James York, but has decided you're an evil git out to take advantage of me.

Please take advantage of me Harry, she thought with a giggle.

He's also starting to focus more on schoolwork, and is fighting a little bit less with Hermione than he used to. All in all, it's for the better and he's easier to get along with. Of course, if he doesn't let up on the protectiveness, I may have to enlighten him with my wand -- and I won't be using a Lumos spell!

Thanks for the advice on the OWLs. I can't believe things are getting so hectic, and it's only the end of the second week at school. I don't know how you did it all last year, especially considering how many detentions you had. And you're right: I need to ignore Hermione and her "study, study, study, OWLs are so important" rants. I wish you were here to counter that.

I better go so I can get up at a reasonable time. Take very good care of yourself too.

Love,  
Ginny

She would mail it first thing in the morning.  
(Fri 27 Sep)

Harry was doing his meditation and Animagus transformation studying, when suddenly his left arm changed. He looked at it in amazement. It felt very weird, but did not hurt a bit. With effort, he changed it back. Trying very hard, he soon made his right arm change. By the end of his session, he was able to change both arms. It was getting easier to feel the animal.

Occlumency was also getting easier. Paul was very different from Snape, and Harry was having very good results. Paul was also much more sensitive to Harry, in that when he broke through, he immediately stopped pushing. He said that after Harry got better and had a better organized mind, that then they would work on repelling an intruder; but for now, they just worked on keeping the intruder out. It was a little after four and Remus had left a little early to take care of some personal business. That worked well for Harry as he wanted to go to Gringotts. He had something to do there that he really didn't want to do, but felt he must. He also did not want anyone else to know about it.

Using his Manor Portkey, he went to his vault, and from there to the lobby of Gringotts. Into a side office, he visited Gorbag again. Half an hour later, he had a basic Will. All of his friends would be taken care of. The only hard part had been deciding who to leave Potter Manor

to. He'd finally decided to leave it jointly to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, as well as Ginny. Moony got Sirius' old house.

As he came out of the door for the Last Will and Testament department, he almost literally ran into the relatively new Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour.

"Ah, Mr. Potter? I almost didn't recognize you. Whoever you got to do the glamour on your scar did a very nice job."

"Thank you, Minister." Harry tried to decide how best to leave. He'd use his Manor Portkey, but that seemed a bit extreme, and he preferred to keep that knowledge private for as long as possible.

"I've been trying to see you, but you've been a hard young man to get a hold of. Why don't we go over here to the side and talk for a minute." The Minister had a hand on Harry's shoulder and guided him to an open alcove.

"I really do need to be going, Minister." Harry really did not want to talk to the man. He was doing better than Fudge, and seemed nicer, but the Ministry was still a mess and Harry did not want any part of that.

"This will only take a minute, and you'll be such a helpful citizen of our world too. Perhaps you'd like to come down to the Ministry soon and visit me there, Harry? I'm sure people would like to see you there. It would help all the citizens to know that things are in good hands and getting better," the Minister told him good-naturedly.

Sifting through the words, Harry pulled out a slightly different meaning. "You just want me down there so people will see me, and assume we're working together, don't you?"

"Well, Harry, there's no reason we couldn't discuss you working with us. A lot of people look up to you; a lot of people trust us. It could be mutually beneficial, you know."

"No thank you, Minister. I'm no one's poster boy. That is part of why I didn't go back to school this year. If you'll excuse me, I really do need

to go." Harry quickly stepped away from the Minister and headed for the front door. Once outside, he quickly found an alcove and used his Manor Portkey.

(Thu 3 Oct)

Lupin found his student still eating breakfast when he arrived. That was pretty common. What was not was what he heard after the greeting.

"Moony, if I could get a law passed that would help us in the war, do you think that would be a worthwhile trade for being the Ministry poster-boy and saying they're doing a good job?"

"What?! Where did this thought come from?"

Harry told him about the chance meeting last Friday afternoon.

"You'd be doing something like selling your reputation, Harry. Are you sure you'd want to do that."

"Absolutely not, Moony. But what if I was careful, to make an ambiguously positive statement in return for the Minister passing a law that anyone captured with a Dark Mark automatically got a few years in Azkaban and a trial for their crimes. Assuming they can keep them in prison, of course," Harry asked dreamily. "Would that be helpful and worth it?"

Lupin was taken aback by that. He could see how that would be enticing to the young man. "I can see advantages to it. Of course, there is a disadvantage to it as well. You do realize that Dumbledore would be ticked off at getting Snape taken away, and he is Chief Warlock to the Wizengamot, so he would be consulted before the law was passed, and might even prevent it."

"An excellent point, or points actually. I asked Kingsley about it and he was pretty neutral about it. He said the hard part is keeping them in prison. He was also of the opinion that Snape didn't really contribute that much information that wasn't known from other sources." Harry finally concluded, "I'll think about it some more."

"I'm not certain that's wise, but I guess it is your choice, Harry." Lupin was a bit worried the young man would get himself mixed up in something he would not like once he found himself there.

(Fri 11 Oct)

Harry could feel it; there was something there. Very carefully, he gathered his magic. He concentrated on his animal, imagined the transfiguration, and pushed himself. While the change did not hurt, he suddenly felt very different. Opening his eyes, he saw the world looked very different too. There was more color, but the perspective was different too. He tried to speak and heard something that was not his voice.

"Harry?" He heard from behind him.

Deciding to try out his wings, literally, he stretched them out and jumped. It was a bit difficult, but he managed to fly up and around so he landed on the study table in front of an extremely surprised Remus Lupin. "Harry?"

Harry trilled at him and bobbed his head, before he thought very carefully and changed. Now he was a boy sitting in the middle of the table. "Wow! Was that cool or what?" he shouted with laughter in his voice.

"I don't believe it. You've finished the transformation already, and a magical creature too. Change back, I want to see again," he teacher commanded. Harry stayed on the table and changed back. There in front of Remus Lupin was black-feathered phoenix with green eyes.

"Excellent; now fly for a minute. I remember James and Sirius telling me that for times like these, you need to let your animal instinct take care of the mundane movements." Remus watched Harry try to fly, and he did a little better than the first time. It took nearly fifteen minutes before it was mostly smooth flying.

Harry landed on top of a chair and sat there for a moment. He wanted to try one more thing. Thinking of his bedroom very carefully, specifically the foot of his bed, he jumped up and flapped once and

willed himself there. Suddenly, he was in his bedroom flying over the end of his bed. Thinking about the library, he went back there and transformed into Harry.

"That's impressive Harry! You can flash too. No more Knight Bus, huh?" the old Marauder joked.

"Nope, not again. I'll have to try the healing tears later. I'll assume that if you grabbed my tail feathers I could take you somewhere. We'll try that later too. How about a celebration, Moony?"

"Sure Harry. What did you have in mind?"

"Don't know. Got any really interesting places in the Muggle world? That's sounds like fun."

"All right," Lupin agreed. "Get your coat on and let's Floo to the Leaky Cauldron. We can catch a cab from outside there and try a Thai food place I like. Interesting atmosphere and good food. We should be there before the lunch crowd too."

Harry found that he liked Thai food. He also decided that he would wait to tell Ginny. There had to be a good prank and surprise in this situation somewhere.

After dinner, Harry again got his dragon hide coat on. He also picked up an extra mirror that he'd made yesterday, its mate having been mailed to Ginny last night along with a note. Harry was glad he had mastered the Animagus transformation this morning, otherwise he would have had to take the Knight Bus.

As he had thought about those around him, he had grown concerned for a special someone. One person who was at a disadvantage, and he wanted to try to compensate for that. Changing into his Phoenix form, Harry flashed to the address he had memorized. Flying around for a minute, he found a street sign and verified he was on the right street, and the house in front of him had the right numbers. That made him wonder how phoenixes did that, but he supposed the simple answer was "magic".



There were a few lights on in the house, so he flew up to the front porch and transformed back into a human. Taking a deep breath, he knocked. A man, a few inches taller than he was, answered the door.

"Yes, may I help you?"

"I hope so. Is this the Granger residence, and are you Dr. Granger?"

"Yes. And you are?"

"My name is Harry Potter. I'm a friend of your daughter's from school."

"Oh yes, that's where I've heard your name. Won't you please come in?"

"Thank you sir." Harry walked in to find a nice house. It was somewhat larger than the Dursleys, better decorated, and if the wall in the living room was any indication, contained many more books than the Dursleys' house. Apparently, Hermione had acquired her propensity for reading from one or both of her parents. "Is your wife in as well? I'd like to talk to both of you, if I could."

"Certainly. Have a seat, I'll go get her." He left for a back room, and returned very shortly with a woman who was only a little taller than Hermione, and had brown hair like her daughter, but whose hair was well under control, unlike her daughter's.

"Dr. Granger, or would Mrs. be better?"

She laughed a pleasant laugh. "How about Mr. and Mrs.? Having two doctors in the house can get confusing. It's nice to meet you Harry, especially as I've heard so much about you. As I would have expected you to be in school, what brings you this way?" she asked.

"Hermione didn't tell you I'm taking a leave of absence from school this year?"

"No. Considering all she does tell us, I suppose that is somewhat surprising. Why are you not in school this year?" Mrs. Granger

continued with the questions, and her husband seemed content to let her do so.

"I have other more important things to do. I'm hoping to return next year."

"What's more important, Harry? If that's not too personal."

"Has Hermione told you there is a war happening in the Wizarding World?"

"War? No, she's hasn't used that word. I think 'unrest' was the way she described it. Perhaps you can fill us in?" Mr. Granger looked concerned as his wife asked for clarification.

Harry was surprised his friend hadn't told her parents everything. "I suppose that this sort of thing will be labeled based on your perception. Much of the population in the Wizarding World has avoided the war, and I guess from their perspective, it might be considered an 'unrest' or only a 'conflict', as they think it does not affect them. For those of us who have been already affected first-hand, we consider it a war. The man that started the war murdered my parents, so I have more interest in it than many."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry Harry. That must make it very hard on you."

"Yes ma'am, it does have its moments. Anyway, this war, as I call it, is why I'm here. Hermione is the only close friend of mine who does not come from a Wizarding family. That puts her and you at a disadvantage; and I'd like to help you narrow the gap."

"You mean we'll get to learn magic?" Her father finally spoke up.

Harry smiled. "No sir, I'm sorry, but that's not possible. What I wanted to do was to give you this device." He pulled a mirror out of an inside pocket. Harry said, "Mirror on," before he handed it over to Mrs. Granger. "As you're not magical, you can't turn it on and off, so I just turned it on. But if you say your daughter's name, the mate to this mirror will vibrate. One of my other friends should have given her the other mirror by now, so you can try it out."

"Why are you doing this Harry? I don't understand how it helps."

"It gives you instant communication with your daughter. If something happens to you, if someone should attack your home, you can call her. She can get wizards to come here to help you. I would be one of them. Part of the reason I wanted to come here was to see your living room and get familiar with it. That will allow me to, ah, teleport, directly here." They looked amazed at that. "I and others can help get you away if necessary."

"You would put yourself at risk for us?"

"Yes, sir. I put myself at risk for many people, but Hermione is a special friend and deserves any help I can give her. She's helped me many times at school."

"Thank you, Harry. Well, let's try it out, shall we?" Mrs. Granger held the mirror up in front of her and said, "Hermione?" Nothing happened.

"Be patient, it is possible she needs a moment to find a private place. But you can speak her name again if you want, that will cause it to vibrate again," Harry explained.

The mother was about to speak her child's name again when the mirror came to life. "Mum?"

"Hermione? Oh Hermione! This is so wonderful. I can talk to you like on the telephone, except that I can see you too."

"Mum! Is Harry still there?"

"Yes, he's sitting right here. Do you want to talk to him?"

"Can I please? Just for a minute?" Hermione asked.

Mrs. Granger handed the mirror over to their magical benefactor.

"Hi Hermione."

"Oh Harry, Dobby is right, you are the greatest wizard."

Harry laughed. "Now, now... Be careful, flattery might get you somewhere."

The girl blushed slightly. "Thank you for thinking of my parents like this. I do worry about them at times."

"I'm glad to help out a good friend, though I hope these are never used in an emergency. I hope they're only used for family chats. Here's your mum back." He handed the mirror back to her mother.

Turning to her father, he pulled out a small box, and with his wand he made it bigger before he handed it over. "This is a soundproof box. Since the mirror is always on, you can store it in here for a while if you need to."

"Won't that make it hard to hear if she's calling us?"

"Yes it will, but if you don't, she'll be able to hear everything happening in the room it's in. There, uh, might be times you wish some privacy," he said with some embarrassment.

"Right," her father acknowledged with a smile, "like when we talk about her."

"Uh, right," Harry agreed. "I should be going. I hope next time we meet, it will be at a party or some other happy occasion."

Mr. Granger stuck out his hand and Harry shook it. "Thank you very much Harry, though I'm not sure Hermione will find this so positive for awhile. I'm wondering if maybe she's left a few things out of her letters."

"I wouldn't know," Harry said as blandly as possible. "Good-night." Mrs. Granger waved at him as she continued to talk with her daughter. Harry Apparated home and he was very pleased with himself for helping his friend.

A/N: Yes, I know that having Harry's Animagus form be a phoenix is incredibly over used. I did so here only because it allows me to be a

wee bit lazier as an author and not have to figure out how to allow him to easily move around to unusual places. This way, he can just flash there. Don't worry though, in general, that ability will have no major bearing on the plot. Any place it would matter to the plot, there is generally another way I could make Harry get there. For example, he could learn to make Portkeys, he could fly his broom there, he could double-Apparate, he could take the Knight Bus, or I could just leave the scene out. But this way, I get to make it easy on myself and give you a few extra scenes.

## Chapter 8: A New Face and a Question

(Sat 19 Oct)

It was nearly half past nine in the morning and Harry was making his final preparations for his outing. He had his dragon hide vest on underneath his main shirt. He had a nice cloak on too. His hair was about halfway between his old short style and his new long style, and it was quite blond. His green eyes were now a light blue. He had already put the glamour on his face, so his cheekbones appeared slightly higher, and he also made his chin slightly wider. The last spell he had used made his voice sound several notes deeper. All in all, he didn't think any of his friends would recognize who James York really was.

He Apparated to the gates of Hogwarts and started walking towards the Quidditch pitch and stadium. There were a few others walking ahead, so he was not the only visitor today.

Harry was approaching the stands when he saw Ginny walking by herself in his direction. She must have been heading for the gates to wait for him, though she had yet to recognize him. As she passed a corner of the stadium, from out of the shadows stepped Draco Malfoy right behind her, his hand outstretched. Harry was about to say something when she suddenly stopped and whirled, her entire body weight behind her right fist -- which slammed into Malfoy's nose.

Malfoy only staggered back, so Harry whipped out his wand and sent a Stunning spell before the Slytherin could do anything else. He dropped like a rock. Ginny turned to see where the spell had come from and finally realized who had been walking towards her.

"Ginny? Are you alright?" James asked her as he hurried up to her. "It's me, James."

She actually gave him a hug and tightly held him while she whispered in his ear. "I'm glad it's you. That git actually tried to feel my bum. Fortunately, all he got was robes, but I still feel like hexing him."

He held her tight. "I'm glad you're all right." In a teasing voice he added, "Here, let me help you out." He conjured up everything needed to write a placard, and in large block letter printed, "KICK ME". Then with a Sticking Charm, he attached the make-shift sign to Draco's robes, about where his belt should be. Draco was already lying on the ground spread-eagle, so Harry was happy as he Vanished the writing tools. "Let's go," he told her. "I'm sure others will take care of this for you."

Ginny giggled. "Nice idea, Harry, but I need to do one thing first." She stepped between Draco's legs and gave a good swift kick. Harry looked away and cringed as she did that. With a satisfied sigh, she turned back to James, took his hand, and said, "Let's go. I think the game has already started." They started walking.

"Uh, Ginny? Why are we holding hands?" Harry asked as they slowly climbed the stairs.

She rolled her eyes at him. "What did we plan now? You're an old friend who's been writing me, and we've been getting friendly. Friendly friends hold hands. When people ask, about us, what are you going to say?"

"That we're, ah, getting friendlier?" he suggested, hopeful it was the right answer.

Ginny sighed. "I suppose it will have to do, but feel free to give a stronger answer. Come on, let me introduce you to my other friends, James." She whispered at the last second, "Don't forget you don't know them, and act your new part." She hoped he didn't mess this up, or his plan would be for naught.

They started squeezing down the rows to a spot Hermione had saved for them. James was getting several strange looks. As they got to their places, Ginny started the introductions.

"Thanks for saving us seats, Hermione. This is James, he's my friend I was telling you about. James meet Hermione.

"Hello James, it's nice to meet you." James returned the hello. "Hey Ron?" She had to drag his gaze away from the game. "Meet James, Ginny's friend."

Ron suddenly shifted his interest from the game to Ginny's friend. "Hello," he said cautiously.

"Hello Ron, I suspect you don't remember me, since I was a grade ahead of you. I barely remember you. I hope you're doing well." James did his best to smile differently, too.

"No, I really don't remember. You're the one that's been writing my sister?"

"Yes, it's an easy way to get to know someone. She a great writer, it's almost like being here. I almost feel like I know everyone here, at least slightly." That was going to be his excuse if he slipped: Ginny told me...

Ron looked thoughtful, "And I see you're holding her hand too."

"Sure, friendly friends do that sort of thing," James replied with confidence, thinking that did not sound too much like Harry.

Ginny pointed him to the boy sitting next to Harry on his left. "That's Neville."

"Hi Neville, I'm James." Harry had written Neville a few times. They were slowly getting to know one another on a more personal level.

"Hello James, nice to meet you. Ginny has been going on about what a wonderful person you are," Neville told him.

That really embarrassed Harry, but he tried to hide it by saying, "Isn't that sweet of her," as well as looking to Ginny. She smiled back.

Hearing a throat clearing behind her, Ginny turned and saw a face that wanted to meet her friend. "Behind you, James, are Dean and Seamus, two more sixth years."



James nodded to them and they nodded back, but Dean did not seem happy to see him. Harry was not sure what that was for. A blond headed boy in front of them turned around, and Ginny introduced Colin. Colin said hello, but he also had an unhappy look on him. Harry decided to ask Ginny about it.

Putting his face in her hair, he whispered, "What's with the looks from Dean and Colin? They don't look happy to see me."

Ginny was impressed Harry had caught that. This was her chance to move things along a little faster. She turned to him and whispered, "They're probably not happy to see you. They've been acting like they want to ask me out." She heard Harry inhale, and the flame in her heart burned a little hotter. "So I think they were hoping you weren't a real person."

She saw a very thoughtful expression on his face, and she began to wonder if she was pushing too hard. Just as she was about to say something else, he whispered back, "So, do you want to date either of them?"

That was one of the last things she had expected him to say. She also noticed a pensive look on his face. The look gave her hope. "No," she told him, "I have my dating life well in hand." When he did not respond for a moment, she squeezed his hand. His eyebrows suddenly shot up. She smiled and turned back to watch the game and let him think.

Hermione started talking to her, and then Ginny noticed Neville was talking to James. She tried to follow both conversations, but his was hard to hear and it was difficult to keep the conversations straight. After some straining, she heard Neville ask James, "So, are you and Ginny dating?"

Ginny held her breath, and when Hermione tried to say something, she quickly shushed her friend.

"Well," James drew out the word, while Ginny strained to hear the answer. "We haven't formally announced anything, but you know how it is, it's basically happening." Neville seemed to buy that and Ginny

exhaled. She had not even been aware she was holding her breath. A part of her wished that was the answer for her and Harry for real, but maybe in time, she hoped.

"What?" Hermione whispered. She had finally realized Ginny was trying to listen to her friend and Neville.

"He thinks we're basically dating," Ginny smiled.

Hermione smiled back. "I'm happy for you Ginny. He seems like a nice guy."

The match went on for another hour and a half. They held hands the entire time, and Harry even began to really like it. The game ended with Ravenclaw winning, even though Hufflepuff had been ahead by one hundred twenty points. Cho Chang's catch of the Golden Snitch, for one hundred fifty points, allowed Ravenclaw to win by thirty points.

As they exited the stands, Harry saw Malfoy was gone. Apparently one of his house mates must have revived him. He also saw McGonagall come over to him. He did his best to hide his fear at being caught.

"Miss Weasley," the Deputy Headmistress called as she came up. "Would you please introduce me to your friend? I like to meet visitors, especially those who could be potential students." Harry started breathing easier. This was a recruiting session.

"Professor McGonagall, this is James York. He's a Muggle born childhood friend who moved away, and has only recently returned. He should be in the seventh year, but he's been home schooled," Ginny explained.

"Oh, I see." McGonagall seemed a bit disappointed. "Welcome to Hogwarts, Mr. York. I'm the Transfiguration teacher and Deputy Headmistress. Are you still taking lessons, or would you perhaps be interested in coming here? We have many fine classes to offer."

James courteously bowed his head slightly. "Nice to meet you, Professor. I'm sorry, but I've finished most of my lessons. It was hard

to do the plants and creatures part, as we had to study it mostly theoretically, but I've recently finished the rest of my course work and will probably take the standardized NEWTs at the Ministry when it is convenient." Harry thought it sounded like a good lie. He also had his Occlumency shields up, just in case McGonagall had the Legilimency skill, but had never advertised it.

"Our loss, I'm sure. Still, if you'd like to take the hands on classes here as a part-time student, it is possible something could be arranged," McGonagall suggested.

"Why thank you, Professor. Perhaps a small thank you for your offer..." James pulled his grandfather's wand out of his wrist holster, his real wand being tucked away so no one could recognize it, and conjured a red rose. "You are most kind," he told her as he handed her the flower.

McGonagall surprised Ginny and smiled with a light laugh. "Oh my, you are the charmer. You should hang onto him Miss Weasley. It was nice to meet you, Mr. York. Please feel free to come see me if you would like to take any courses here." The teacher left with her rose.

When they were alone, Ginny told him, "That was incredible; you really had her charmed and fooled."

"Actually, I can't believe I just did that; it was so unlike me. But you know what? It was fun."

"I'm sorry I can't invite you up to the castle to visit longer, but I really have to send you away." Ginny looked sad.

"It'll be OK, Ginny. I'll be back next week. Maybe we can hold hands again?" Harry asked hopefully.

She laughed and gave him a good-bye hug, which he returned. "Of course; I look forward to it. Don't forget your letters though. I look forward to those too." They parted and each started walking their own way. One knew why she felt lonely, the other was starting to wonder if maybe there was a real reason for his sudden loneliness, and maybe that reason was behind him walking away.

(Sat 26 Oct)

Ginny sat in the locker room waiting for Ron to give the pre-game pep talk. Harry was to be here again as James, but she would get to spend very little time with him, maybe thirty minutes at most after the game. Today was mostly for Harry to watch her fly and to spend time with his friends, even if he was in disguise and they did not know it was Harry.

She started thinking back to something that had happened this past week concerning Harry.

--flashback--

Ginny and the other five Gryffindor prefects had been meeting with Professor McGonagall. After the meeting, the Professor had asked Ginny to stay behind for a few minutes. She queried Ginny about James a little more. Ginny gave a few more made-up facts, ones she and Harry had already agreed on.

The professor went silent for a moment, but did not dismiss the girl. She finally asked another question, one Ginny was not expecting. "Miss Weasley. You seem to have a propensity for writing letters, as evidenced by your friendship with Mr. York. Have you also been writing to Mr. Potter as well? I believe I've seen his owl bring you and your friends letters from time to time."

"Yes, Professor. We've exchanged letters, though he's been writing me mostly to give me advice for the DA lessons."

"Most helpful of him." The older woman paused as if struggling with something. "Do you know why Mr. Potter did not return to school this year?"

Ginny was even more surprised. "Why do you ask?" Her mind raced to try to figure out what Harry would say if he was here.

"I'm aware that Mr. Potter had a lengthy conversation with Professor Dumbledore, but I'm not privy to what was discussed. While that is Mr.

Potter's business, if there is a problem here at school, I would like to know about it so it can be corrected."

She obviously could not tell about the Prophecy, but maybe... "Will you keep this to yourself Professor?"

"If you ask me to."

"Then please consider this confidential. There are many reasons for Harry doing what he has done recently, but his disagreement with many of the Headmaster's decisions is a major reason for his actions." The professor looked surprised. "The only additional thing I'll say is to tell you to think about everything that has happened to Harry over his life, from when he was born to last June, and how Professor Dumbledore has been involved. Then consider what if Professor Dumbledore had done something different, or told Harry what was happening, or asked Harry what he thought would be the right thing to do. Would Harry have been a happier and a better person?" Ginny looked at her Professor and saw deep consideration. She quietly got up and let her Professor continue to think.

--flashforward--

Ginny came out of her memory as Ron started his pep talk, the Gryffindor and Slytherin match was about to begin. Ginny readied herself to fly against Draco Malfoy.

Harry, disguised as James York, climbed into the Gryffindor stands. He was slightly earlier for this game, so he had an easier time getting a seat next to Hermione. He still got a few strange looks, as visitors did not normally sit with the students, but no one complained. James also saw Professor McGonagall look his way and smile at him. He smiled and nodded back.

James had a great time in the stands. He was again sandwiched between Neville and Hermione, talking to each, though Hermione talked to him much more. She mostly asked him what the seventh year classes were like. As he supposedly had not had classes like she had, he told what "Madam Slayter", his personal tutor, had

covered. He used what Remus had been doing for his mythical teacher in Ireland.

He knew he had to be careful with her, as she would pick up on inconsistencies in his stories, so he did his best to prevent that by asking her lots of questions on Hogwarts, her studies, and her friends -- especially one who was now flying.

"Hermione, what is Ginny like? I mean, I get one image of her in her letters, a slightly different image when I'm around her, but what is she like to you and others here?" James asked with real curiosity.

"Ginny is who she wants to be, and interestingly enough, that can change. She's smart and caring, but she's also got a temper that you don't want to be around when it gets going. Ginny is also really coming into her own. You probably would not recognize her from a couple of years ago, she's so much more outgoing now than she used to be." Hermione stopped and looked at him as if debating something. "You're also very lucky to be going out with her."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"I don't think she would want you to know the details, unless she told you herself, but for the longest time, there was only one boy she had her sights set on; and I thought that was still true. She also has several other boys here who want to date her, but she seems to have told them all no." The brunette giggled a little. "It's sort of amusing in a way; they all thought she was making you up."

Harry was almost breathless from hearing that. He tried to chuckle along with her, but his mind was reeling. Harry knew about her crush on him when she had first started school, and that it had continued for at least the next year as well. But then she had dated Michael Corner for at least half of her third year and some of her fourth year as well. Harry wondered if she still cared for him; but Hermione had told him last year that Ginny was over him. This did not make sense.

However, he did not have time to consider it further, as it was apparent both Ginny and Draco Malfoy had seen the Golden Snitch. They were battling it out in their chase of the little winged ball. Harry

wanted to be the one up there, he also wanted to knock Malfoy off of his broom for the way he was bumping into Ginny.

Just as the two were about to reach the Snitch, the little ball dove. Ginny reacted faster and followed it. Malfoy had been watching Ginny to do something to her, so he did not see the ball dive and again tried to ram the Gryffindor Seeker. But Ginny was not there and he overshot since she was not there to bump into. That mistake was all it took to make it easy for Ginny to grab the Snitch. Gryffindor won, 280-90.

Everyone in the Gryffindor stands jumped up and down and yelled, James as loudly as all the students. In her jubilation, Hermione turned to him and gave him a hug, before she turned to Lavender on her other side. James suspected she had not even fully realized what she had done. He gave high fives to Neville and the other boys sitting near him, before he too exited the stands to go down to the field.

Ginny was already on the ground, but she had been looking for him, because when he got there, she ran to him. James grabbed her in his arms and twirled her around, both of them laughing. Giving her a real hug now, he told her, "You were magnificent!" She did not get to reply as she was pulled away by her brother giving her a hug.

A few moments later, James got back to her, and this time he grabbed her hand and held on so he would not lose her. As the impromptu celebration on the field started winding down, and some people began heading into the castle, Harry pulled Ginny over to the side.

"Ginny, we need to talk."

He didn't look upset, but he did not look happy either. In fact, Ginny thought he looked more confused than anything else. Considering this should be a happy moment, that confused her as well. "Yeah, sure." She followed him as he pulled her along. "What's up, James?"

James leaned against the wall to one of the stands and pulled her over so she was standing right in front of him, and he held her hands

loosely. "Ginny, I need to know something, and I need you to be as honest as possible."

This did not sound good to the girl. "All right, James."

"I, ah, I need to know, how you really feel, uh, about me -- the real me."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No," he softly told her. "I feel like I should know, and Hermione tells me you've had your sights set on one guy, which I think must be me from everything else she said. But she also told me last year that you gave up on me. I also know we've got this thing going to help me and cover ourselves, but I'm starting to wonder if you're really acting -- if we're really acting. I can't figure out what to think and I don't want to hurt you."

Ginny closed her eyes and dropped her head to his shoulder in despair. There was nothing like hurting yourself with your own words. A reasonable boy probably would have figured this out for himself, but Harry was not like that. By his own admission, he did not understand girls, or much about love. He did not understand her comment, and apparently Hermione had not clued him in either.

"I'm sorry, I thought you understood. You see, 'gave up' does not mean 'got over'. I gave up waiting and starting going on with trying to enjoy my life instead of just sitting around dreaming, but I've never really gotten over you," she whispered, "Harry."

He stared at her trying to work that out.

"How you feel about me?" Ginny asked him tenderly.

Harry started, "I, ah, I ..."

"Hey Ginny! Come on, let's go to the celebration party!" Her brother was running over.



Harry saw anger flare in her eyes and she moved so quickly, he would have been hard pressed to keep up with her as her wand whipped out and was pointed at her brother, who came to a quick halt less than ten feet away.

"Ron! You will leave us alone right now, or I swear, not even Madam Pomfrey will be about to reverse what I do to you."

Her brother's eyes bugged out at her wand, and the intensity of her voice and threat. "I'll just go to the party then, but you do need to come soon as visitors are supposed to be leaving." He slowly backed away and then left.

Ginny put her wand up and turn back to Harry, stepping back into his reach.

"I better go," Harry told her, the moment had been lost.

"Harry, I need to know what you're feeling. Please don't do this to me, tell me something." It was all she could do to hold her emotions in check.

He looked into her eyes. "I don't know Ginny. I, I don't know what to call what I feel. Can you give me time to figure it out?"

"Do you like spending time with me Harry? Just answer that and I'll be satisfied for now." Her eyes were pleading for a good answer.

Looking at her brown eyes, lightly freckled nose and cheeks, along with her gorgeous mane of red hair, he felt like he was under a spell. Finally, he managed to say, "Yes." He wanted to say so much more, but somehow could not get the words to come out.

Leaning forward, she gave him a hug that nearly squeezed the breath out of him, then she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, before she ran for the castle. She did not look back; she was afraid she would return to him if she did.

Harry stood there stunned after he'd felt her soft lips on his cheek and watched her run away. Finally coming to his senses, he made his

way to the gates of the school, where he very carefully Apparated home. He was very distracted for the rest of the day.

As Ginny came into the Gryffindor common room, the party was rowdy as almost every Gryffindor was there. When Ginny saw her brother, the thought that he'd interrupted her just as she was about to find out what she had been waiting for four years, made her so incensed, she could not stand it. Marching over to him, she drew her wand and pointed it at his face before he had even realized what was happening. Everyone around him froze at the sight of the very angry witch, afraid they'd be next if they made a wrong move.

Ron saw his sister fixed him with a stare he'd only seen from his mother. Then in a low but clear voice, he heard, "Ronald Bilus Weasley." He knew he was in trouble now. "If you ever interrupt one of my conversations again, you'll be lucky if this is all that happens to you." He could not make his legs move before he heard, "Chiroptera Mucosus!" The pain in his nose was incredible as the little flapping animals escaped then started clawing his face. He fell to his knees from the pain and to try to get away. He never saw his sister leave the party for her dorm room, not to return for the rest of the evening.  
(Tue 29 Oct)

Moony had just left for the day and Harry was hurrying to get ready to leave. He had an appointment he had not told his teacher about. With his bush hat to hide his now scarless forehead and his protective coat, he took his Manor key to Gringotts. After a goblin came to get him and took him to the lobby, it was one minute before five in the evening. A quick search found his waiting party on a bench, and he was alone as requested. It wasn't hard to see a couple of Aurors standing around as if they were doing business, though it was obvious they were watching the man on the bench. Gorbag had been quite helpful in getting permission for this meeting inside the bank.

Harry walked around the edge of the room until he came to the bench. There, he sat down too. "Good afternoon, Minister."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Potter. Since you suggested we talk, I assume you think we can work together?"

"Possibly, but first, a privacy charm if you please?" The minister pulled out his wand and did the spell. Harry continued when he felt it was safe. "I'll jump straight to it, as I'm sure you're busy. If you'll take care of three things, I'll let myself be found by some reporters where I'll say that due to some things that have happened lately, it appears that the present Minister and his administration understand the war we're facing, unlike the last minister; and that with more work like this to help the Wizarding world, there is hope that Voldemort can be defeated."

The Minister nodded slowly in acknowledgement. "Perhaps not as strongly worded as I would have liked, but you have my attention. What do you want to see happen?"

"Three things Minister, two of them are very easy. One, I want an Apparation license. I want the license not a waiver to take the test early. Either my teacher can teach me correctly, or he can't, so testing doesn't matter. Two, I want a full waiver on the Restriction of Underage Magic. I know that I can't get into trouble for self-defense, but it's a hassle to have to prove that every time I need to do something. It's also stupid for people who've passed their OWLs not be able to do useful everyday magic like cleaning spells, but that's another topic for another time."

The minister chuckled at that. "And the third Harry? Because you are correct, those two are easy."

"I want to see a law passed that makes it a crime to have a Dark Mark, and it should have an automatic prison sentence, in addition to any other crimes the person may have committed and can be sentenced for after a trial for them." The minister looked amazed at the thought. "I'd prefer the sentence to be for at least five years, but if you have to bring it down to make it pass, it must be at least two years or don't bother. We need to thin the ranks of the Death Eaters. The hard part will be keeping them in prison, but that's your problem to solve -- though I might suggest a different location and/or with better hiding spells."

"The automatic sentence will make it hard to get passed, Mr. Potter."

"Minister, you and I both know that to get the Dark Mark, a Death Eater will have had to go through an initiation. That 'act' will involve at least one Unforgivable curse, and probably will have contained at least one murder. So I see no problem with sending someone like that to prison for a few years. After all, what's the current sentence for doing an Unforgivable curse? Anyway, even if the person has supposedly reformed, they still committed the atrocious acts at one time and should be punished for them. I also ask that the law be written such that if the defendant claims they were under the Imperius Curse, they have to prove it, and I would think a Memory Retrieval charm by an expert should suffice. I've had one expert tell me it should work to prove whether the person was a 'victim' or not. I believe this law would benefit everyone."

"I see your point. Still, it is a tall order."

"One more point if I may, Minister. I don't want my name attached to the law in any way, not even that I suggested it to you. Please take all the credit for yourself; I will be more than happy to say that I like your law." Harry now looked at the Minister and let his fledgling Legilimency skill attempt to passively discern the Minister's thoughts. If the Minister knew Occlumency, he did not use it. Harry found the Minister to be much more delighted now that he would receive the political accolades.

Scrimgeour acted very neutral, unlike his thoughts. "Very interesting, Mr. Potter. I'll get back to you on this."

"No need to trouble yourself, Minister. I'll read about the results in the Daily Prophet. Either the law as I've stated passes, in which case I'll come in to pick up the two pieces of paperwork and speak to a reporter that just happens to be in the lobby, or there's nothing else to be done. I want to see the Death Eaters and Voldemort punished for what they've done to my family, and I think this will do that, as well as give the average Wizard and Witch some motivation to get involved to remove some Death Eaters. Good day, Sir."

"And a good day to you as well, Mr. Potter." The Minister of Magic watched the young man walk back to the door to the vaults underground, which seemed quite unusual; but then, Harry Potter

was an unusual person. With various interesting thoughts running through his head, he nodded to one of his guards that he was ready to go. They walked out the front doors of the bank and Apparated back to the Ministry.

Ginny almost skipped dinner that evening. Zeus had finally come back to her this morning, two days late. She'd pocketed the letter at breakfast, but hadn't had any privacy to read the damn thing all day; she was so frustrated. She almost tried to skive off History of Magic and lock herself in a toilet stall, but managed to restrain herself after she realized a couple of hours was not going to change what Harry had written to her. She knew that she could have mirrored him, but she had resisted that to give him the space he needed, even though it had almost killed her.

The second she was done eating, she left all of her friends in the Great Hall and all but ran to her dorm room, where she stuck her curtains together and put up two privacy charms just to make sure. She did not know if she would be crying her eyes out, or jumping for joy. She had pushed Harry hard during his last visit; she was praying she had not goofed and pushed him too hard.

She supposed that if it all went to hell in a hand basket, she could take up the offer from one of the other boys. While Terry Boot had stopped paying her attention, Dean and Colin still gave her the occasional wishful glance. In fact, Colin was getting slightly harder to work with on prefect duties because he would not accept her answer, and she had to keep telling him no.

Hoping for the best, she tore open the envelope and pulled out the letter. It was semi-long, she thought that might be good.

Dearest Ginny,

That was hopeful, she thought.

I'm sure I should start this with an apology. If I were there, I'm almost sure you would slug me, if I'm lucky, or else hex me, because I've taken so long to write. So, I'm sorry if you've been on pins and needles there, I didn't mean to do that to you, but I needed a lot of

time to think. Moony has been quite vexed with my distraction all day today.

I think I've now come to the understanding that you either still like me, or have started to like me again. The point being that you like me.

I'm afraid that I still can't figure out what I feel.

Ginny groaned and wanted to hex the boy, but then why had he written so much more? She would have to keep reading...

I mean it must have a name, but I can't figure it out. I can tell you that there are a number of little things that I like about you.

Well, this was more promising. Maybe she would not have to hex him after all.

Your light chocolate brown eyes are very interesting to look into. I find your sprinkling of freckles across your nose and cheeks to be cute. Your hair has always amazed me, it's just a nice color with its several shades of red, and I enjoy seeing it sway across your back as you move. I just want to run my fingers through it. The rest of you is pretty nice looking too.

OK, that's a decent start, she thought, at least as long as he doesn't have a "but" or "however" coming.

I also find you to be quite smart, fun to be around, a great sense of humor, a good flyer, interesting and easy to talk to (except for this sort of thing), and if I can be very very bold, you were very exciting when you got angry with Ron. I couldn't tear my eyes away from you when you were like that. It made me want to

That's quite a list there Potter. That last line which she could barely make out intrigued her. She wondered what he had started to write. As she thought about it, him liking her when she got mad was either really daft on his part, or else it made her feel very sexy and made her want him more. Maybe both, she finally decided.

And I've enjoyed holding your hand, as well as holding you in hugs. Then when you kissed my cheek before you left, it was like my cheek was on fire.

Oh, Harry, you just wait until I get a hold of your lips. Ginny was really liking this letter now.

I guess I'm trying to say that I think I like you too, or at least I like a lot about you. My problem is that I don't know what this is, but I suspect you do or can help me figure it out.

"Yes!" she screamed. "He likes me!"

I do want to thank you for not calling me on my mirror and for letting me try to figure this out. This is another reason why I think you're such a great person: you think about others and care for people. Well, now that I've done this, please let me know whether I do understand how you feel and we should do something more, or if I really misunderstood you and I've just destroyed our friendship.

Yours if you want me,  
Harry

Ginny about died with pleasure. It had taken over four long grueling years, but she finally had Harry Potter right where she wanted him. Well, that wasn't quite true, she reflected. If he was where she wanted him, he would be here with her right now and she would be snogging him senseless.

Looking at her watch, she found it to be only a little past seven. Not her normal time to call, but she was not going to wait on this. Grabbing the mirror, she eagerly called his name.

Harry's face came on the mirror. "Uh, hi Ginny," he said very nervously.

"Harry, were you really worried?"

"Uh, yeah."

She laughed. "You silly boy, of course I want you. Didn't I make myself clear?"

"Ginny, you know I'm rubbish at this stuff."

"Fortunately," she told him with a smile, "I do. Or rather, I did when you told me this summer. I think I'd be completely exasperated with you if I hadn't heard your explanation to Professor Lupin."

"You mean you, uh, couldn't figure me out either?"

She smiled. "I suppose you could put it that way, though it sounds like I understood you better than you understood me."

"That's for sure. I mean, how's a guy suppose to know that 'give up' doesn't equal 'get over' or 'doesn't like anymore'?"

She laughed again. "Yeah, I suppose girls do think differently."

"So, now what?"

"Well, I know what I'd do with you if you were here right now. Other than that, it looks like James and Ginny are going to become a lot closer," she told him.

"What would you do with me if I was there?"

She gave him a devilish smile and teased him. "Sorry Harry, you'll have to use your imagination. I can only show you, not tell you."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Do you know the old charms classroom at the bottom of the stairs from the Tower, to the right, and three doors down?"

"Yes, why?"

"Go there now."

"What for?" she asked.



"Just go there now. Mirror off."

That was definitely weird, she thought. Ginny put her mirror into her robes, in case she needed it, took down her charms, and headed for the specified room.

As she passed through the common room, Hermione saw her and called to her. "Hey Ginny, I saw you leave dinner early. Are you all right?"

Ginny grinned and giggled. "Yes, everything's perfect!" More people looked up at her now and watched her skip through the room to the portrait hole and out of the Tower.

Ron looked at Hermione and commented, "She's finally done it. She's gone completely around the bend. Barking mad."

Hermione wanted to chastise him for describing his sister and her friend that way, but she actually agreed with him.

Ginny went to the room Harry had mentioned. When she closed the door behind her, a locking spell hit the door from inside the room. She could not believe her eyes, there stood Harry. She had no clue how he'd done it, but she was so overjoyed, she ran to him and all but knocked him over. Pressing her lips to his, she did her best to kiss him thoroughly. As she moved her hands to his longer hair, she deepened the kiss. He responded in kind, by also deepening the kiss, as well as putting one hand on the small of her back and the other threaded its fingers through her hair and played with it.

As if making up for a long absence, they lost themselves in each other. Eventually, Ginny thought to look at her watch, and noticed that curfew had started fifteen minutes ago. With great difficulty, they parted and she made her way back up to her dorm room without getting caught in the corridors. Hermione was quite upset with her for being late, but Ginny was in such a good mood she completely ignored her friend's rant.

It was a good thing she had so little homework that evening. She went straight to bed and dreamed of being in Harry's arms and more kisses from her official boyfriend.

(Wed 30 Oct)

Ginny woke up in a wonderful mood, but she considered it merely an extension of how she had felt when she had gone to sleep last night. Her wonderful mood lasted until she realized how quiet her dorm room was, how much light was coming in the window, and what time was on her watch. Breakfast was starting right now.

Leaping out of bed, she rushed to get ready. Because she had the bathroom to herself and did not have to run around the other girls, she was finished much faster than usual. Nevertheless, breakfast was half over by the time she arrived at the Great Hall. She found a seat available next to Hermione. In the perfect world, the person on the other side of the opening would not have been Dean Thomas, but she was still in her wonderful mood and very hungry, so she sat there anyway.

As Ginny started dishing out some breakfast, Hermione asked her, "Ginny, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm wonderful," she replied very bubbly.

"Are you sure? I mean, you left so quickly last night after dinner, then you were gone all evening, and now you're late this morning." Hermione was really concerned for her friend.

"I've never been better," Ginny proclaimed. "James asked me to be his girlfriend last night. I was reading his letter and then replying. It's just so -- wonderful." She was exuberant. In her haste to eat, she did not catch the disappointed look Dean was giving her. However, she was looking the right way to see the look her brother was giving her. "What is it, Ron?"

"Ginny, I, well, I'm just wondering how good this is. I mean, how well do you really know him? You've just written some letters and seen him at a couple of Quidditch games."

"Ron, are you trying to get into trouble by being a protective brother again?"

"No, absolutely not," he quickly backpedaled, sounding as if it was the last thing on his mind. "If you're happy, then I'm happy," he said quickly. Then he turned more serious. "But I am concerned that he hasn't been around long, so we don't know much about him. He could be a bad person in disguise."

Ginny laughed at that. Her brother actually had the disguise part right, but James was not a bad person. Leaning very close to Hermione so she could speak to both of them very quietly, she asked, "Would you consider him a bad person if I told you I saw him hex Draco Malfoy before the first Quidditch game?"

Hermione gasped, but Ron looked thoughtful until a slow grin came over his face. "So, when do I get to thank this new boyfriend of yours Ginny? I think I'd like to buy him a Butterbeer." Even Hermione showed amusement at that.

"I'll tell him and see what he says. If we have a Hogsmeade weekend, I'm sure he'll come; or at least he better."

Ron laughed at that. "Already trying to wrap him around your little finger, Sis?" Ginny just smiled.

Hermione turned to her friend and whispered. "Ginny, what about Harry? I know you still like him."

"I do, Hermione," Ginny whispered back. "He's still a special friend. But like you told me, I need to enjoy life, and that's what I'm doing." Others were starting to stand to leave for class, so Ginny grabbed one last slice of toast to eat while she walked. She tried to imagine what her friend's reaction would be when she found out James was Harry. Ginny had no idea when they'd tell her and Ron, but that would be such a fun time, or so she imagined.

Remus Lupin went to work at his usual time, and found the usual scene waiting for him: Harry was finishing breakfast.

"Morning, Harry."

"Top of the morning to you too, Moony! Breakfast?"

Unlike usual, Harry seemed to own the morning; he was rarely this chipper first thing after getting up. "No, thank you. You seem to be in a spectacularly good mood today."

"Oh yeah," the boy answered. "How many Patronuses do you want and where do you want them?" He laughed at his own joke. "I'm having a hard time deciding how it could be any better. Even if Voldemort himself gave up the war and turned himself in, I don't think it would make me feel any better."

Lupin laughed. "All right, Harry, what happened?"

The young man grinned mischievously at him. "Can you keep a secret?" Then he laughed as Moony rolled his eyes. "Let's just say that Ginny and I have come to an understanding."

"Really, now." Moony smiled. He had been wondering if this was going to happen. He had noticed the young man and how he had been talking about the young woman for some time. In many ways, he was very happy for Harry. He deserved someone like Ginny; he also deserved some happiness. Harry's speech about lack of understanding about love during the summer also came back to him. Perhaps this was what the young man needed to help with that. "I'm very happy for you."

"Thanks! I'm really happy for me too."

If Lupin did not know better, he would have thought that Harry had been hitting the Firewhiskey this morning. "Well, let's go to the Dueling Room and see if I can wipe that smug smile off your face."

Harry laughed. "Sure, if you think you're wolf enough."

Moony groaned and pulled his student up from the table to start their lessons for the day. By lunchtime, Moony was the only one that had been on the floor, and the smug look was still on Harry's face. He

needed Kingsley's help and wondered when he could get the Auror over so they could both work Harry over.

## Chapter 9: Some Fun, in More Ways Than One

(Fri 1 Nov)

An owl brought Hermione's Daily Prophet to her at breakfast. She slipped some money in the bird's pouch for all of next week's subscription. Unrolling the newspaper, her eyes about fell out of her head. This was more amazing than yesterday's edition, and that had been surprising.

"Look at this!" She showed her friends and turned it around. There on the front page was a picture of Harry Potter standing in the ministry in nice everyday robes and a cloak around him, looking like he was giving a speech by his hand and body movements. The headlines read: CHOSEN ONE SPEAKS OUT ON NEW LAW.

Ginny snatched it out of her friend's hand. Ron spoke up, "Well, read it to us if you're not going to share." Ginny was not the only one reading it, many other students in the Great Hall were, too, based on the heightened buzz. Almost all the teachers were leaning over and looking at the paper on the table in front of them.

### CHOSEN ONE SPEAKS OUT ON NEW LAW

Yesterday morning, Harry Potter came in to the Ministry of Magic at a little after eight where several reporters were lucky enough to talk to him. When asked why he was there, Mr. Potter merely replied he had some business to take care of, just some simple forms to turn in and tried to leave. However, when asked what he thought about the new law that passed on Wednesday which gives a mandatory three year sentence in Azkaban to anyone with a Dark Mark, the Chosen One slowed down and gave us an answer.

"I believe I will answer that one. I think this new law is a good idea, and I applaud Minister Scrimgeour not only for coming up with the idea, but for pushing it through. Unlike the previous Minister and his administration, Minister Scrimgeour and his administration seem to have a better grasp on the fact that we are at war. The law is a good start to ending the war sooner, and I hope to see the Minister provide us with more good leadership.

I really wish we would have had this law sooner. I believe many people haven't known how to get involved to help end the war. I am now hopeful that more people will see this as a way they can help by reporting Death Eaters, or if able, by detaining them and calling Aurors. That can be a hard thing to do, it can even be a dangerous thing to do, but if we all work together, we can remove the people who are trying to harm our society, and bring them to trial for the crimes they have committed. You don't get a Dark Mark by being a nice person; you have to have earned it by doing Unforgivable Curses and other crimes. We need to stop them and make the Wizarding world a safe place for our children, both now and in the future. As another Englishman once said: The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. I say, let all magical beings overcome their fear and work together on this.

Now if you'll excuse me, I really do need to take care of some business, both here and elsewhere."

Though the Chosen One started off somewhat nervously, he ended strongly and even received applause from those who were in the lobby when he spoke. Mr. Potter managed to get away after discussing the new law and did not answer any more questions.

We wonder what the future holds for The-Boy-Who-Lived. After he defeats He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, does he have a career in store for him at the Ministry? Though it will be some years before he is old enough to hold office, some here believe the chair of the Minister of Magic is waiting for him.

In related news, late yesterday afternoon, shortly after the new law went into affect, two of the four members of the Wizengamot who voted against the new law were found to have a Dark Mark on their left forearm. They are now being held pending their trial. (See story on page 3.)

"Now that was impressive," Ron said. "I'd vote for him."

"Yes, very impressive how Harry had an opinion that sounded that good as he walked through the Ministry building that just happened to have reporters in the lobby," Hermione said softly.

Ginny heard her, however. "Harry did pretty well speaking in front of the DA last year when he needed to. The article said he started nervously, which sounds like Harry. And you know how he can be when he talks about something he really believes in."

"Oh, I have no doubt about all of that, I'm just wondering about the timing and circumstances."

"What are you saying, Hermione?" Ron asked.

"Nothing in particular, just that I'm wondering," the brunette answered.

"Well, look at the head table. There's not much to wonder about there," Ron pointed out. Indeed, most of the teachers had an interested or happy look as they discussed it with each other, the exceptions being Dumbledore and Snape. Dumbledore looked concerned, while Snape looked almost livid.

Lupin found Harry finishing breakfast, as usual. He dropped the morning paper in front of his student. "Was it fun, Harry?"

Harry looked up to see his teacher with a very neutral expression on his face, before he looked at the picture on the newspaper. "Wow, they took a nice one of me this time. Yeah, Moony, in a very small way it was fun. But as I told you yesterday, the important thing is that I'm hopeful this law will help the average person be a little more involved, and that we can thin the ranks of the Death Eaters to slow down their terror and destruction. If my giving a little speech will do that, then it was a good thing in my mind."

"It may also get more people killed, Harry. Not everyone is being trained like you are."

"I'm well aware of that, but some people who aren't involved are well trained. And even a large number of average wizards and witches doing something can stop a few Death Eaters. Look at our practices.



The training dummies really are dumb, but enough of them together can even take me out. The Order needs to get out of the mindset that they are the only ones who can do anything. This problem with Voldemort affects everyone, and everyone needs to get involved. We need to go after them, not just fight defensively."

Lupin sighed. "That's well argued Harry; I just hope you're right, and that not too many innocent people get killed."

"You and me both," Harry agreed. "Any word from Dumbledore?"

"Just that he's very ticked off at this law passing. He's very concerned for Snape."

"As well he should be, Moony. Do remember what Kingsley said: Snape gives us very little information that they don't get from elsewhere."

"That may be true, but it's the timeliness of the information that Snape brings us. The other sources take too long sometimes," Lupin argued.

"I won't try to argue against you there, but I will argue that that man should not be teaching at Hogwarts. If he's that valuable as a spy, let him continue, but let him do it where he can't hurt students. Even Dumbledore's Pensieve isn't big enough to hold all the memories of the things he's done to me that he should not have."

"It's a nice idea, Harry, but it may not be possible. Albus has never said it, but I believe that the reason Snape is at Hogwarts is to make Voldemort think Snape is spying on us. So if we removed him from that teaching position, Snape might be killed."

"Assuming he is on our side. I'm not convinced of that," Harry said with some fervor. "I think there's a good chance he's solidly Dark. And don't tell me Dumbledore trusts him. I've seen how many mistakes the old man has made with me. Who's to say he hasn't made other mistakes with other people?"

Remus could not argue with that, so he dropped it all. "Time for Charms, Harry."

(Sat 16 Nov)

It was nearly six in the morning as Harry finished breakfast. He really did not want to be up this early, but it was for a good cause. In fact, it was so good, when Harry had shared the idea with Moony, the old Marauder had helped Harry with a fervor Harry had not see in the old family friend before.

Harry transformed into his phoenix form and flashed to the Great Hall at Hogwarts. It was empty, as it should be at this hour. Harry checked out the rafters, but did not find one he liked. Searching, he found a window up high on the wall that afforded him the view he wanted. Landing there, he made himself as small and comfortable as possible as he waited.

At eight o'clock, the doors opened and students and teachers alike started entering for breakfast. Harry remained motionless, his black feathers making him more inconspicuous. After the initial crowd had seated itself, smaller groups of students started arriving, Harry saw his friends finally come in and take their place. He had an excellent view of them. While the food looked good, he was not hungry, nor was that why he was here.

The arrival of the morning owls signaled the start of his fun. He watched Zeus fly in and land in front of Ginny. She petted her owl and made much of him as she took a parchment tube from the owl before giving him several bits of sausage before he took off.

Ginny looked at the tube in front of her. It was not a normal letter like James usually sent, though it had James' handwriting on the note attached to the outside. "Urgent, open as soon as possible; a friend of mine gave this to me to give to you -- James." Concerned, she laid the note on the table in front of her and took the contents out to unroll it. When it was about half unrolled, her brain not only registered that it was a photograph, but that it was a photo of Harry in a pose as he was exercising. The sheen on his body was obvious, as was the fact that he did not seem to be wearing anything on the part of him she could see. Mortified, she quickly rolled it back up.

"What was that, Ginny? It looked like a picture of Harry without a shirt on."

That simple sentence had every girl's head at the table in hearing distance snapping in her direction. "It's n-n-nothing." She suddenly felt incredibly hot.

"Then why are you blushing so much," Lavender Brown asked from two seats away. "Come on Ginny, if it really is a photo of Harry without a shirt on, and hopefully wearing less, we'd all like to see it. After all, you already have a boyfriend."

Ginny was in a panic though, she could not let anyone else see this or touch it. She'd never get it back again. Not knowing what else to do, she jumped up from the table and ran out, leaving most of her uneaten breakfast behind. Seeing the main doors in front of her, she ran out them and into the cool morning air.

It was all Harry could do not to start trilling in laughter. Expecting to be contacted via mirror, he flashed out from his sitting position in the window to the top of the astronomy tower. There he landed and transformed back into himself. He started laughing so hard, it was difficult to apply the charms he needed to turn into James. Once he did, he looked down onto the grounds and was luckily rewarded with the view of a slender redheaded girl standing on the grass staring at what looked like a parchment in her hands. Grinning, he transformed and flashed to slightly behind her and quickly changed back into a human before she could turn.

Now that Ginny felt that she was alone, with trembling hands, she slowly unrolled the photo in her hands. When it was fully opened, she saw Harry much like she had that day during his work out, but this was a shot from the front at a slight angle. He was wearing some red shorts that seemed smaller than what she remembered, although his muscles were better than she remembered. What really caught her eye was the look on his face. He was intensely staring ahead, almost but not quite at the camera. It was the most intense and sexy look she had ever seen on a boy. She was glad he was not here right now, otherwise they would be in deep trouble. Ginny was not sure she would be able to resist him right now.

Hearing a noise behind her, she turned to find James standing there. Like last time, she launched herself at him and kissed him very soundly while her free hand roamed over his back feeling those strong muscles. James barely kept his balance to avoid being knocked over.

When Ginny had to come up for air, James managed, "Well, it's really nice to see you too."

"I can't believe you did that Harry."

He grinned broadly at her. "Your face was priceless too."

"You saw me open it?" Her mortified look returned.

"It was really good, and made the whole thing worthwhile. Come on," he encouraged her, "let's continue towards the lake where we can have some privacy." He led her while she covered her face in embarrassment. She was so absorbed in her feelings, she did not think to ask how he had observed her.

As he found a little place that was off slightly off the path around the lake, she finally found her voice again. "I can't believe you did that to me Harry, and what am I going to do with it?"

He laughed quietly. "I thought you'd like to look at it."

"Are you always this egotistical?"

"Nope, I'm just having fun. Well, you did tell me you liked looking at me that one day, and you sounded like you wanted a picture of it, so I was just giving you what you asked for," he told her innocently. She glared at him slightly. "Hey, you're the one that called me a rogue. I'm just living up to my image."

Ginny could not maintain the put out look and started giggling. "I am going to have a very real problem with this you know." He looked at her to explain. "Hermione saw the top half of the picture and blurted out that I had a picture of Harry without a shirt on. Every girl in the

area heard that and was interested, and I bet they hound me to see it and get a copy."

"I do hope you resist," he said with a smile. "I made that only for you."

"Thanks Harry. Of course, I can't put it on the wall in my dorm; it would get stolen in about half a second. I can't put it on my wall at home; my mum would have kittens if she saw that. It's going to have to be locked in my trunk until I can think of a better place for it."

Harry continued to smile at her as he stepped back against a large tree, pulling her with him. "Life is rough for us rogues." He pulled her closer and they started kissing again.

Nearly two hours later, they were sitting against the tree with Ginny on his lap quietly talking when they heard voices. Harry told her, "Remain perfectly still," while he quickly pulled out his wand and Disillusioned both of them.

"This looks like a good place for a snog," a familiar voice said as a couple came towards the little spot Harry and Ginny were hiding in.

"Ron, focus on the task. We need to find Ginny. Since she's not in the castle, she's probably out here. We need to make sure she's all right." The couple came into view and they were holding hands.

"Just for a minute 'Mione?" Hermione stopped and looked at Ron, before she gave him a quick kiss.

Harry felt Ginny squirm in his lap and he gripped her more tightly around the waist to get her to hold still.

"That will have to hold you for now," Hermione told Ron. "Come on, let's keep looking." They walked off hand-in-hand.

After a moment, Ginny whispered, "That was more than I ever needed to see."

"That was interesting. I wonder when that started."

"Hard to say, but Ron has been getting better, almost more grown up. They fight a lot less too, which is really nice."

"Well, he is growing up; he's nearing seventeen. I wonder when they were going to tell us about them dating?"

She giggled. "When are we going to tell them about us?"

"They already know you're dating James."

"No silly, that you and Harry are the same person."

"Yeah, I guess I need to do that," he mused. "Maybe Christmas time would be good."

"I suppose it's as good a time as any." Ginny suddenly groaned. "Harry, I left your note on the table. I know Hermione would have found that."

"So? I signed it James in my James handwriting."

"You don't understand. Hermione will see it's from James, but the picture was of Harry. She's going to wonder how James got the photo to send to me."

"Oh, well, ah, ..." He thought fast as to how to spin this one. "How about, there was a letter inside with the photo that said I was in Diagon Alley getting some owl treats and met this nice bloke about my age, and we really hit it off. During our conversation, he said he used to go to Hogwarts, I said I was dating a girl from Hogwarts, we both knew you, and he said he had this great idea for a prank, I agreed, so he got me the photo to send to you."

"That is so stupid, but it just might work," she admitted. "Naw, I think I'll try the total denial routine."

Harry suddenly felt two hands go up his chest and grab his head. He was pulled into a kiss.

"You know, that was sort of -- kinky. I've never kissed invisible lips before," she said with a giggle.

He tried to move his hands up and suddenly had his hand slapped down. "What?"

"Harry, no touching there."

"Where? I can't see a thing about you, you know?"

"Just keep your hands on my waist, let me take care of the kissing," she commanded, and she kept him busy.

Eventually, her stomach rumbled. "I probably better go," she told him sadly. "It's got to be near lunchtime and I do have a lot of homework to get done this weekend."

"If you must..." he told her in a fake pouty voice.

"Harry? I know how you get home, but how do you get here? It's like you Apparate or something, but I know you can't Apparate into Hogwarts."

He laughed and started getting up so he could pull her up. "Hermione is right, you can't Apparate here. As for my travel, that's my secret for now; I'll tell you soon."

"Harry!"

"Ssh, Ginny. I'll tell you soon. Make sure I know about the next Hogsmeade weekend so I can meet you at the gates and escort my girlfriend around, and I'll let you in on my secret," he bribed her. "How's that?"

"Not fair, but I guess it does give me something to look forward to. One last kiss, Harry."

He gave it to her, and then told her, "I'd suggest you keep the disillusionment on until you get to the entrance. Bye for now Ginny."

He became visible just long enough that she saw him holding the Manor Portkey, then he was gone.

Sighing, she returned to the castle for lunch. She made herself visible at the doors and went into the Great Hall. Deciding to face the music now, she took a seat next to Hermione.

"Where have you been?" her friend hissed. "We've been looking all over for you."

"Look, you're the one who embarrassed me," she very calmly told her friend as she tried to turn the focus back away from herself. "It just took a while to compose myself."

"But we couldn't find you, Ginny."

"I just have a good hiding place, that's all."

"So, was that really a photo of Harry?"

"Nope, you're imagining things," Ginny told her, and she did not give in to Hermione's pestering. When all the other girls in the dorm asked her, Ginny told them Hermione had been seeing things. It was hard and required all of her acting skills, but she dug herself out of the hole Harry had put her in. If she could figure out how, she was going to prank him but good.

(Fri 22 Nov)

At ten in the morning, James York was standing next to the gates of Hogwarts. He expected it would take Ginny a few minutes to get through the lines, then a bit more to come down the path. So he was quite surprised to see her nearly fifteen minutes sooner than he had expected. But then again, he had not expected to see her arrive on a broom either.

Ginny landed next to him and threw her arms around him for a hug before she kissed him.

"You missed me?" he asked teasingly.



"Do you really have to ask?" she teased back.

He laughed. "It was nice of Dumbledore to let everyone have a day off from school for this. I know Moony is enjoying his day off."

"Yeah, I think the Headmaster is trying to keep the Death Eaters off balance by doing it on a Friday instead of on a Saturday. Of course, only announcing it last night at dinner helps him too." She held out her broom and he shrunk it down for her. She put it in her pocket for later.

"Where to first, Ginny?"

"I thought you were going to show me a secret?"

He grinned at her. "I will this afternoon. How about we walk around for a while?" She agreed, so they walked looking in the shop windows, his arm around her shoulders and her arm around his waist. They hit Honeydukes before the rest of the students got there. As they left the candy shop, the couple noticed students starting to arrive, as well as a few Aurors walking around. Ginny saw Tonks and led James over to her.

"Hey, Tonks!" Ginny called out.

"Wotcher Ginny. Who's arm do you have there?" the Auror asked with a teasing smile on her face.

"Tonks, I'd like you to meet James, my boyfriend. James, Tonks is a friend and an Auror, as you can tell from the badge on her robes."

Harry stuck out his hand. "Hi, nice to meet you."

"Same to you," Tonks returned.

"Are you, like, undercover or something? Or do you just like the color pink?" James asked mischievously. He was being very careful to use his James voice.

The young woman laughed. "I just like pink hair."

"O...K..." Harry gave her a lopsided grin and told her, "I prefer deep red hair."

Ginny blushed while Tonks pointed at the girl's predicament and laughed. "Come on James, I think we have other shops to see." She started to drag him away. "Later Tonks."

"See you later, Ginny. Nice to meet you, James." The boy waved at her as he walked away, his girlfriend on his arm.

As it neared lunchtime, Harry started steering her towards the Shrieking Shack. Arriving, he pulled her to the side behind a tree and some bushes. As he was about to hold her tightly to Apparate, he heard voices. They both froze as they heard the Malfoy drawl, though it was soft.

"Look around, I'd swear I saw them go down here a minute ago. Father will enjoy her in more ways than one before he gives her to the Dark Lord to use as bait. Even if she does have another boyfriend, I bet Potter will try to rescue her."

Harry's blood was about to boil, but he managed to hang onto his temper as he drew his wand. He saw Ginny draw hers too. He pointed at her and then at Goyle. Waiting a few more seconds for them to spread out so he could get Malfoy first, Harry whispered, "Stupefy! Stupefy!" His second one was mimicked by Ginny, and all three of the Slytherins were on the ground unconscious.

"That was too easy," Ginny whispered.

"Maybe, but surprise is always a great tactical advantage when you can get it. Come on." He led her over. Pulling on the robes covering Draco's arms, he was not surprised to find the Dark Mark on the left forearm. Surprisingly, both Crabbe and Goyle did not have it.

Harry put a Anti-Disapparation spell on Malfoy. Grabbing the boy's wand, Harry tied him up and then disillusioned him. Tossing Malfoy's

wand on top so Harry could see where his cargo was, he used a Mobilicorpus spell to move Malfoy along.

"Let's go, we need to take him in," Harry told her.

"What about those two?"

"I'd say leave them, but who knows how long it would take them to wake up. When we get up there so you can barely see them from the bend, shoot an Enervate back at one of them. That should slow them down as he would have to wake up the other and then figure out what happened." Ginny agreed that sounded reasonable.

It was not hard to find Tonks again.

"Wotcher Ginny! Uh, James," she finally remembered Ginny's boyfriend's name. "Why are you levitating a wand?"

James dropped the body and cancelled the Disillusion spell. The Auror stared at the trussed up Draco Malfoy. "Check out his left forearm."

As Tonks cut the ropes so she could look at Draco's arm, Ron and Hermione came up. They saw the Dark Mark too and looked at each other.

"No surprise there, really," Ron commented, before a smile broke out on his face. "Hey, this means a Draco-free school for the next three years."

"Actually, forever," James corrected him. "You can't enroll in Hogwarts with a criminal record that includes a crime big enough to land you in Azkaban."

"I didn't know that," Hermione said.

"That's what I was told when I checked out the school." It was only a very small lie, but it allowed James to keep his disguise.

Tonks bound him back up. "Very good, James. I'll need to fill out a report, and I'll be off." She reached into her robes and pulled out a very small book, which she enlarged to be notebook-sized.

"Uh, can we say he was found by an anonymous person?" Tonks looked at him strangely. "I don't mind helping out, but I really don't want my name on the report," James explained.

"Hmm, I suppose we could say I found him. You sure about this? You might get some sort of reward by the Ministry for helping to catch a person under the new Anti-Dark-Mark law." The Auror was amused by him turning down the honor, not that she really cared one way or the other.

"I think you can take the credit, Ms. Tonks," James told her politely. Grabbing Ginny's hand, he told the Auror, "I think we'll go; bye!" He pulled his girlfriend back and they started walking, leaving a chuckling Auror with her prisoner behind.

Harry suddenly realized that Hermione and Ron were following them. He also saw Crabbe and Goyle slowly walking back into town. Seeing the book shop coming up, Harry pulled Ginny into there. Their friends followed, and he groaned.

Crabbe and Goyle walked by oblivious to the couple they had been trying to capture. They were still puzzling over what had happened to them and where Draco had gone.

Hermione cornered them in the book shop. "James, why didn't you want to take credit for the capture of Draco Malfoy?"

"Because I didn't want to." She still looked intently at him, Ron and Ginny remained quiet. "Look Hermione, like I told Auror Tonks, I don't mind capturing them, I just don't want the publicity." She still stared at him. He sighed. "Look, you're Muggle-born, right?"

"Yes."

Harry set his argument as if he really was James York. "And what happens when my name gets on that report? It's a public record. My

registered address is with my parents, my Muggle parents who can't do magic." James stopped as Hermione's face showed understanding. "I'll step up and follow Harry Potter's lead to help fight the Death Eaters, but I still need to protect my family."

"I'm sorry James, I should have realized that, but I hadn't thought that through for some reason," Hermione apologized.

"That's OK, Hermione. You've probably had something else occupying your mind, like this bloke here." She blushed. "Did I see you two holding hands?" James asked in a teasing and accusing manner.

"Wait a minute now, you can't say that." Ron stepped forward slightly.

"Well now," James smiled. "Between her blushing and your posturing, I'd say I've just found out something. What do you think, Ginny?"

"I think so, James. So when did this start?" Ginny asked.

"Come on Hermione, let's go." Ron grabbed her hand, confirming yet again their status as they left.

Harry and Ginny both laughed. "I'm going to have fun when I get back to the common room later tonight," Ginny predicted.

"You'll have to tell me about it later. They should be far enough away by now; come on." He led Ginny out the door and around the corner. No one was there, so he Apparated them both to Potter Manor.

Going inside, Winky had lunch ready for them. It was nice to have a quiet and private lunch. They spent most of the day talking, holding each other close. Occasionally, they would lose themselves and snog for a few minutes, but they found they wanted to get to know one another better.

When it was time for Ginny to return, Harry let her sit on the couch as he stood in front of her; and with a big grin, he transformed for her.

"Harry?! You can become a phoenix? And, look at you! I've never heard of an all black one." She gave a low throaty laugh, "This is great, and you're gorgeous this way too." She gently stroked his feathers enjoying their softness.

He flew up in front of her and hovered, while he wiggled his tail feathers. She remembered how they had left the Chamber of Secrets with Fawkes and grabbed onto Harry's tail feathers. Before she realized what was happening, she was no longer in Potter Manor, but was at the edge of the forest, not too far from the gates of Hogwarts. As he set her down, he dropped and transformed back to a human when he was a few feet off the ground. He landed on his feet perfectly.

"Very nice," she complimented him.

"Thanks, it took more practice than I would have initially thought. Come on, I'll walk you to the gates." Harry escorted her down. They did not see anyone else coming behind them, though they did see someone in the distance coming from the castle.

Harry wrapped her in his arms and gave her a very lingering but tender kiss. "I guess Christmas break in a month will be the next time we see each other?"

"No, next time I see you will be when I call you on the mirror," she teased him.

He looked up and the person approaching was now recognizable as Professor McGonagall. "Take very good care of yourself."

"I will, and James," she was afraid McGonagall might overhear her now, "thanks for making this a Malfoy-free school."

"My pleasure."

"Miss Weasley, I must close the gates, unless you want to be late and serve detention with me," the Deputy Headmistress informed her student.

They told each other good-bye and parted. Harry Apparated home, while Ginny walked back to the castle. Professor McGonagall waited a few more minutes for any stragglers before she locked the gates.

When Ginny got to the Great Hall for dinner, it was to an interesting sight. Three of the four tables were happy, the Slytherins being the exception. Ginny got a few evil looks from the Slytherins, so she decided she needed to keep an eye on them, as well as who was around her in the halls.

Ron was ecstatic at Malfoy's departure, Hermione was subdued. She was still thinking about James' comment on Muggle families.

## Chapter 10: A Christmas to Remember

(Fri 20 Dec)

Harry had a real dilemma. Should he meet Ginny at the station as Harry, or as James? Each was valid, and in some ways, either could be expected. Since he wanted to talk to all of his friends, and there was a good chance Mrs. Weasley would invite him for dinner, he decided to go as Harry. He and Ginny would just have to put on a good act as normal friends until they could find some private time, no matter how much each wanted to snog the other senseless.

As Ginny waited for the train to slow down as it neared the London station, Hermione asked the very question the other couple had been dancing around. "So, is James going to meet you at the station? That would give him a chance to meet your family."

"He wasn't sure," Ginny answered. "He said he had some family obligations that were hard to get out of, but he promised to come see me tomorrow."

"That's too bad," Hermione commiserated with her.

"Yeah, we'll both be without our boyfriends," Ginny said with a straight face. She had not stopped teasing them about that, and when Ron objected, she merely told him that she would stop when he stopped being a chicken by hiding and told others that he and Hermione were dating.

The train finally came to a stop. Everyone grabbed their belongings and exited. Mrs. Weasley was easy to find. Ginny was amazed to see Harry standing right beside her, looking as sexy as ever in his long hair that was pulled back, along with his dragon hide coat peeking out from under his cloak. He also had a lightening bolt shaped scar on his forehead, so he had apparently got that Glamour working.

Harry made sure to hug everyone, though Ginny got a hug that was a little longer than everyone else's. He was not surprised to get, and gladly accepted, an invitation to eat dinner at The Burrow.



The non-Weasley students left, but a minute later, Hermione came back over. "Harry, would you, umm, do me a big favor?"

"Probably. What did you have in mind?" She seemed unusually nervous to Harry.

"Would you hold onto this during the holidays?" She thrust her magic mirror into his hands. "If something happens, I won't be able get help, but you will."

The look of faith in him on her face tore at Harry's heart, although the question of why she had given him the mirror instead of Ron, never entered his mind. "Of course, Hermione, I'll be happy to. Although I can't imagine why there would be a problem."

Hermione gave him a hug before she returned to her parents to leave. Both he and Ron watched her go, but for very different reasons. As the Weasleys and Harry left the train platform, Ginny fell into step beside Harry. They talked companionably on the way to the house.

Harry had a wonderful time that evening, as long as he did not think about what he really wanted to be doing with Ginny. As he went to leave, Ginny managed to slip out onto the back porch with him for a few moments. One hug and good night kiss was all they got that evening. Harry had told the Weasleys that he'd be back on Sunday, and that he already had plans for tomorrow. It was difficult keeping the smirk to himself.

(Sat 21 Dec)

James York Apparated to the back garden of the Weasleys at eleven in the morning. That seemed like a proper time for a visitor to be calling, he thought. He knocked on the door and waited. When it was opened, he was greeted by a big smile and a shout.

"James!" Ginny threw herself at him and he wrapped her in a hug. Then because she could kiss this version of Harry, she did. Ginny heard a polite clearing of the throat behind her, so she stopped far sooner than she would have otherwise, and turned to see her father standing there.

"Why don't you invite him in Ginny so we can all meet him," her father said with a slight smile.

Disengaging herself from her boyfriend, Ginny grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. In the living room, James found not only his girlfriend's father, her slightly older brother, and her twin brothers, but her mother came in too.

With a smile, James teased, "Ginny, aren't we missing a few people? I thought you said you had six brothers. You need to find them to complete the intimidation." She blushed and the others chuckled.

"Mr. York, I presume," Arthur Weasley held out his hand.

"Yes sir, Mr. Weasley. However, please call me James."

"This is my wife Molly." The woman surprised James by coming over and giving him a hug. Though it was not like the ones he got as Harry, it was still a nice hug.

"I believe you already know Ron, and finally our twins: Fred and George." Arthur sat after the other introductions.

James nodded at the brothers and then sat down on a small settee with Ginny. "It's nice to meet you all, Ginny has told me so much about you." He looked around, and they all seemed friendly, then something caught his eye. "Mrs. Weasley, if you don't mind, I need to do something here in your home for self-preservation." He whipped out his wand and soundlessly cast two spells in the direction of Fred and George. Molly gasped, and had an incredulous look on her face at his audacity.

George went to move and found he could not get up. When he put his hand on the arm of the chair he was in, he could not move it again. "Hey! What's with the Sticking Charm?" For once Fred did not say anything after his twin, instead, he was looking at his right hand. A few seconds later, Fred turned bright neon pink all over: skin, clothes, and hair.

Arthur got over his shock at the guest's actions and started chuckling to himself. Molly and the rest of her family soon joined the father.

"Yeah, I see how it is," Fred finally found his voice. "You laugh at a bloke when he's down and out just because you can."

"But brother, you look pretty in pink," George told him. Everyone laughed harder.

Molly came over and gave James a Weasley hug this time. "I think you'll fit in just fine, James. I've got lunch almost ready, why don't you come in the other room and have a nice glass of pumpkin juice."

As everyone left for the other room, Arthur walked over to the twins. "Fred, George," he said in a no-nonsense manner. "James will be allowed to have a nice time this afternoon, won't he?"

"Yes, Dad," they said in unison, knowing what better happen when their father's normally easy going manner was put aside. Nodding, he removed the Sticking Charm before going to lunch too.

Though he got very few private moments with Ginny, James did enjoy the day. After dinner, he took his dishes to the sink and found himself alone in the kitchen with the matriarch of the family. "Mrs. Weasley, is everything all right? You look like something is wrong."

Her face immediately brightened, but he could tell that one unguarded moment reflected her true feelings, not this happy face. "No James, nothing is wrong." As he looked at her questioningly, she finally added, "You seem to be a nice young man, I was just expecting someone else..."

James smiled. "You were expecting Ginny to be dating someone else?" She nodded. He could not help himself. "Be patient Mrs. Weasley, Harry will come around eventually."

Molly looked up at him in shock. "How did you know?" she asked softly as if a buried family secret had been revealed.

He continued to smile at her. "I met Harry once. He's a nice guy. We got along pretty well and I think we have a lot in common, though I'm more outgoing than he is. Harry will be in my place with Ginny one day, I'm sure of it."

After a moment, Molly hugged him. "I'm sorry James, that was wrong of me. I'm sure I made you feel unwanted and I didn't mean that. I meant what I said about you being a nice young man, you just caught me in a bad moment."

"No problem, Mrs. Weasley. I like your family very much. I'll be around Ginny for as long as she'll have me; she's a great girl." He looked at the clock on the wall, and saw that the Harry hand was on "Home"; that amused him. "Listen, I better go, I don't want to wear out my welcome."

"You're fine; it's not that late."

James smiled. "Thank you for the dinner, Mrs. Weasley. I think I have good food at home, but yours is better. It was nice to meet you." He left the kitchen and found Ginny in the other room talking to her dad about school. He wondered if that had been arranged so Mrs. Weasley could talk to him, but he could not tell and was not going to ask.

"I think I need to go home, Mr. Weasley, so I thought I'd say that it was nice to meet you."

Ginny moved to him and casually put an arm around his waist. "Do you have to? It's not that late."

"Yes; sorry, Ginny. Listen, I'm busy with my family tomorrow, but I'll try to drop in for a few minutes Monday night, OK?"

She smiled, "All right." Of course, Harry was coming tomorrow, so it was not nearly as bad as it sounded. She almost giggled at the complicated schedule they were creating. "Here, let me get my cloak and I'll walk you to the Apparation spot."

The parting kiss was wonderful, Harry thought. "Until tomorrow, Ginny," he whispered.

"Tomorrow, James," she whispered back. He Apparated home and she went back inside out of the cold wind.

"He's a nice boy," her mother said. "Reminds me of another boy who comes around here," she said with a hint of mystery.

"Harry will be mine some day, Mum," Ginny told her as she walked up to her room, missing her mother's shocked stare at having her mind read.

(Tue 24 Dec)

It was Harry's turn to enjoy dinner with the Weasleys; James had been over last evening. He thought Mrs. Weasley had outdone herself on the Shepard's Pie. She had also hinted she had several fruit pies waiting for dessert.

As he scooped up the last bite on his plate, he felt his robes vibrate for a few seconds. That puzzled him as he was sitting next to Ginny. When he felt the vibration again a couple of seconds later, it occurred to him that he had another mirror on him. Dropping his fork, he quickly dug for the mirror. At the sound of the fork hitting the plate, all eyes were on him.

Pulling the mirror out, he quickly said, "Mirror on." Before he could say anything else, he heard a shout from the mirror that chilled him.

"Harry! We have Death Eaters attacking!" Everyone at the table heard it too.

He did not respond verbally. Instead, he thrust the mirror at Ginny not even waiting to see if she had grabbed it. He did not hear Ginny tell the mirror, "Harry is on his way."

Overturning his chair over in his haste to leave, he ran for the door, grabbing his coat on the way and shrugging it on as he left the house. It was half buttoned up by the time he left the Anti-Apparation field around The Burrow. He grabbed his wand and Apparated.

Harry landed in the Grangers living room and immediately went into a roll, his instincts saving his life as a Killing Curse went over his head. Hearing the spell cast from behind him, he turned as he came up and fired a Bludgeoning hex at the front door behind him. He watched the spell hit a Death Eater in the stomach and knock him back out the front door. Wanting to stall any more Death Eaters, he conjured a brick wall in place of the now non-existent front door.

The front door was barely secure when spells started coming in the front windows. Harry quickly filled the window sills with brick walls so no one could see in or fire curses through the windows.

"Harry!"

Hearing his name, he looked across the room, and on the stairs stood Hermione. He started running that way, when the sound of breaking glass came through a doorway on his right, obviously someone trying to break in from the back. He conjured another brick wall in that doorway while running.

"Where are your parents?" he quickly asked.

"Up here behind me. How do we get out? You've walled up the room below." Hermione was not her normally know-it-all-confident self. Harry could tell she was hanging on to her Gryffindor courage by a thread, though she was putting on a good facade for her parents.

Harry bounded up the stairs and almost ran over her when he got to the top. There in the hallway were her parents, crouched down so nothing could get them from the windows. Mr. Granger had his cricket bat with him.

As Apparating them one at a time was going to be too time-consuming, there was only one way to get them all out quickly at the same time. Harry conjured a board, and with an engraving spell, he hastily wrote the secret key phrase to Grimmauld Place. He handed it to the Grangers and told them, "Quickly read and memorize this. Don't worry about knowing where it is."

An explosion downstairs got his attention, turning around and looking down the stairs, he saw the brick wall to the kitchen had been destroyed. He sent a Reparo down before the dust had even finished settling. He only needed about ten more seconds. Knowing the brick wasn't enough, he also hastily put some barrier wards across the bottom of the stairs.

Turning back to the Grangers, he asked, "Do you know what you read?" They nodded, so he Vanished the board. "Quickly, stand up and grab my arms. Mrs. Granger, grab my left bicep, Mr. Granger my right one. Hermione, stand in front of me and put your arms around my neck." He pulled out the Black key.

"Har-ry!" Hermione sounded like she had been asked to do something naughty in front of her parents.

"Damn it, Hermione! We don't have time, this is life or death. Come here!" Harry felt the Grangers grab his upper arms while Hermione finally stepped in front of him. He roughly grabbed her and pulled her against him.

A small part of his brain registered her softness and warmth pressed against him, as well as her feminine smell, but most of him was holding onto her while he touched his wand to the key behind her back. A few seconds later, all four of them were in the foyer of the House of Black.

His hands on her sides, he quickly pushed Hermione back, while her parents let go of him. They looked like they were dizzy and about to be sick. With a bad feeling in his stomach, he turned to his friend. "Hermione? Lock the door behind me and then help your parents." He ran out the front door, continuing on down the walk until he felt himself leave the Anti-Apparation field around the house. The moment he did so, he Apparated to The Burrow, hoping he was wrong.

Harry came out in the back garden of The Burrow into the middle of a fight. His bad feeling had been right. He kicked out at a Death Eater on his right to throw him off balance, then turned and punched a Death Eater on his left in the nose with the heel of his hand. Turning

back, he hit the first Death Eater with a stunning spell to take care of him. The one with the broken nose was lying on the ground screaming. Unfortunately, that attracted attention.

Spells started flying at him, two from Death Eaters and one from the house. He just had to hope whoever was in the house recognized he was on their side. Dodging the spells, he sent a Reducto at one of the Death Eaters, then he turned to the last one, who was having to block a spell coming from the house. Harry stunned that one too. Knowing Death Eaters tended to run away when they failed, he used that moment to put up an Anti-Apparation field out here in the garden.

"Stop!" he yelled at the last Death Eater. "Quit now and prison is the worst you'll get." He also hoped that his voice would help those in the house to clue into who he was.

"That's so noble of you -- Potter," the Death Eater oily sneered.

Harry knew that voice. "Snivellus, I think I'm going to enjoy this."

"You think you're so good? Avada Kedavra!"

Harry dodged as the Killing Curse started coming toward him and sent two Reducto curses as fast as he could. The first Reducto took out the Death Eater's shield, and the second curse hit him on his left leg, shattering his knee as his leg bent completely backwards the wrong way. Even in his injured state, Snape tried to lift his wand, so Harry sent a Severing Curse at the man's wand elbow and separated it from his body.

Looking at his former Professor, who was now defenseless, Harry finally cast "Legilimens!"

Unlike Snape, Harry did not use a blast of mental energy like a club; instead, he used another technique Paul MacDonald had taught him. He shaped his mind energy like a spear: hard, sharp, and very small. With surprising ease, he pierced the mental shield of Snape and found himself in a sea of filth. Swimming through the memories, he searched for a couple of specific ones.



Snape struggled to push the boy out, but he was very surprised by Potter's strength of mind, unlike last the time he had worked with the boy on Occlumency. The incredible pain in his left knee and right arm handicapped him greatly, as he couldn't keep his concentration. His memories went flashing by and he could not seem to stop them.

Harry quickly found one thing he was specifically looking for, but he wanted something else. Pushing back in time, Harry finally found what he was looking for, as well as a few bonus items. Stopping the spell, he looked at Severus Snape. "Well, I guess I finally know the truth. It's going to be very fun telling this secret."

Snape had seen the last memory Harry had viewed, and could not afford for it to be told. In a last effort, he reached for his wand with his left hand, but Harry had been expecting it. "Sectumsempra!" Snape screamed as a huge cut appeared on the Death Eater's chest and stomach, blood now flowing very freely. "An interesting spell, Snape. I'm glad you taught it to me. I'll have to try out some of the others I found in that gutter you call a mind. Accio Wand!" Snape's wand came to him, and the Potions Master lost consciousness. The extra wand went into a pocket as a trophy.

Turning to the house, he started walking to return to his girlfriend, but Ginny came running out, wand in hand, to greet him before he even got halfway.

"Harry!" She threw herself at him and wrapped him in a tight hug. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I got the Grangers safely to Headquarters too," he reported.

She grabbed his head and kissed him fully on the lips, savoring him and his victory.

As she released him from her passionate welcome, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Death Eater he had hit in the face move. Knowing a spell was coming at him, he prayed it was not an Unforgivable and turned his back to the Death Eater and tried to shield Ginny. The cutting curse mostly hit the back of his coat, but

part of it hit his head. Fortunately, the curse's power was reduced as the Death Eater had had to cast it non-verbally, which was not one of his strengths.

Harry fell to his knees and took Ginny with him to the ground. He did not see George stun the Death Eater. Harry's immediate thought was to get to safety. He managed to pull his Manor key out, and with his last conscious thought, he touched his wand to the key.

All the Weasleys came running out of the house as the battle finished. Arthur and Molly had not been able to restrain Ginny as she went running to the lone person standing, the one with Harry's voice and, by the light of the three-quarter moon, looked to be wearing Harry's coat.

They were not sure which they were more stunned to see: Ginny run up to Harry and kiss him soundly, or Harry obviously returning it. Then one of the Death Eaters rose back up. While George was quick, he had not been fast enough and the Death Eater had hit Harry with a spell, causing him to fall down. As bad as that was, it did not compare to seeing the two teens disappear as they fell to the ground.

Molly was beside herself. "Where did they go?!" But no one had any idea.

"We better get these tied up and call the Aurors," Arthur suggested, not sure what else to do at the moment. That was quickly done, but in checking the last one, they found his cloak to be soaked in blood, half of his right arm detached, and his chest was not moving.

"Bloody hell!" Ron exclaimed. "It's Snape!" The others came over and found him to be correct.

Arthur shook his head. "Molly, you better go call the Aurors. I'll stay here."

The mother hurried back into the house, but she found her Floo in use -- a head was in it calling for her.

"Mrs. Weasley, Mr. Weasley, anyone!" Hermione called.

"Hermione dear, are you all right?"

"Other than being in shock, I think we're fine. Did Harry make it back? He left here and hasn't come back."

"Yes, he came here and battled several Death Eaters, but he and Ginny left and we don't know where they are." Molly was getting more distraught the more she thought about it.

"Knowing Harry, he probably went somewhere that he considered to be safe."

"Hermione, where are you right now?"

"Oh, we're at Headquarters," Hermione answered.

Remembering what she was supposed to be doing, she told the girl, "I'll call you back in a few minutes, I need to call the Aurors." Hermione's head left, and Molly called the MLE emergency Floo.

Maybe half a minute later, a squad of six Aurors came out of the fireplace with wands drawn and ready. Molly had not ever met any of them before. "They're all out back. Please follow me."

The Aurors were amazed all the Death Eaters were already subdued and tied up. "What happened to this one?" the lead Auror, O'Neil, asked. "I don't think I've ever seen a cutting spell of that power."

"I don't know," Arthur answered. "The person who did that, well, most of the fighting really, isn't here any more."

"Oh, where is he? We'd really like a statement, as well as find out what happened."

"Well, he got hurt at the very end, then he disappeared, along with our daughter. We don't know what happened other than they're gone." Arthur was a little distressed, but he knew they'd get through this somehow.

The lead Auror turned to another on his team. "Frank, quickly check St. Mungo's for anyone injured from a fight in the last ten minutes." Turning back to Arthur, he asked, "Oh, what are their names?"

"My daughter is Ginny Weasley, she should be capable of talking. I don't know how bad Harry was hurt."

"Harry who?"

"Harry Potter."

"THE Harry Potter?"

"Yes," Arthur acknowledged.

"Frank, go!" The other Auror ran so he was outside of Harry's Anti-Apparation ward and left.

"And he got most of these by himself?" O'Neil asked.

"Yes. We got one over there when we realized they were out here. We were lucky to be looking out here when they Apparated in. Then while we were fighting, Harry came in and took care of the rest. Apparently, one of them woke back up and cursed him." Arthur explained.

"Uh, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley?" one of the other Aurors called. "I think you're being paged from inside the house. It sounds like someone yelling over the Floo, but I can't make it what they're saying."

"Oh, it's probably Hermione, I told her I'd call her back." Molly hurried back into the house. Opening the door, she heard someone screaming, "MUM! DAD!"

"Ginny?!" She ran to the fireplace. "Ginny! Oh I'm so glad to see you. Where are you?"

"Harry and I are safe, we're at his place."

"How did you get there, young lady?"

"Harry has a way to always get home, but it doesn't matter. Harry is hurt and while I think I've stopped the bleeding, I'm not sure what else to do." Ginny was not quite in a panic, but she was having to work not go there.

"Very good dear, stopping the bleeding is the most important thing. Now where are you and I'll come over and help." Molly was starting to breath a little easier.

"I can't tell you Mum, it's hidden like Headquarters."

"So then, how do you know where it is?" Molly was starting to wonder what all was going on that she did not know about.

"Because I was told, obviously. Now what do I do for Harry?"

Molly closed her eyes for a few seconds and determined she was going to get to the bottom of this. "How bad is he hurt? Can he be Flooed back here?"

"Well, he's unconscious, and while the bleeding has been stopped, it was hard to do so. It's on the back of his head and neck. I got the house elves to help me move him to a bed."

"House elves? Oh, right, I forgot that Harry had mentioned he has house elves."

"Yes, mum. He pays them so they're not slaves," Ginny said with some exasperation, as she could not figure out why this mattered now; she was sounding like Hermione. "What about Harry?"

"Oh, right, sorry dear. How deep is the cut?"

"Well, on the head, it goes all the way to the bone. On his neck, it's on the back and maybe a quarter-inch deep or so. It did miss his spine."

"Thank goodness for that," Molly exclaimed. She thought for a moment. "Ginny, can you come here to get some potions?"

"Yes, Mum."

"And get back?"

"Yes, Mum."

That got her mother to wondering if other visits had happened. "Come here then and let me give you some things. It doesn't sound too bad. Let's see what we can do this way."

"Yes, Mum. I'll be there in a few minutes after I check on him one more time." Ginny's head disappeared.

Molly shook her head as she wondered about how this was going to turn out. Getting up from in front of the fireplace, she went back outside. "Arthur? I found them. Harry somehow took them to his place."

"His place? Are they safe?" Arthur was concerned, but he felt better now that he knew where they were.

"She says yes, and that it's hidden. She's coming here to get some potions. I better go back in. Why don't you tell the Aurors they don't have to hunt for them, and they won't be getting a statement from Harry for a while. He's been hurt, though it doesn't sound too bad. Oh, and they need to send someone to the Granger's house as Death Eaters were there too."

Molly went back in and started gathering some potions from her cabinet. Ginny Flooded in and joined her.

Setting her box of medicinal potions on the counter, Molly looked at her daughter who had a worried look on her face. "Ginny, I'm sure he'll be all right. It really doesn't sound all that bad."

"But Mum, you should have seen all the blood," her daughter almost started crying.

"Now, now, Ginny. I'll help you get him fixed up. Then when he's able, he can come and I'll take a look at him, alright?" Ginny nodded. Molly started pulling out phials. "Head wounds do tend to bleed a quite a bit. Now, give him half of this, it's a Blood Replenishing potion. Give him all of this one, it's a Strengthening potion. Use this one, it will help the wounds heal, just carefully drip it onto the wounds. Oh, and a Headache potion might be useful when he wakes up. Understand all that?" She handed over the four phials.

"Yes; thanks, Mum!"

"Very good. Now, I have one question for you before you go back. What all are you hiding from me?" Molly looked at her daughter closely as the girl thought about how to answer that.

"I'm sorry, Mum, I can't tell you anything because I'm hiding Harry's secrets, and I promised not to tell."

Her daughter was growing up. Molly knew secrets and boys were part of that growing up process, but this seemed to go beyond that. Just as she was about to ask again, but differently, her daughter spoke up.

"I'm sorry, Mum, you'll have to ask Harry. He's the only one who can tell you."

Molly resigned herself to having to wait to get her answers, but she would try again, so she nodded.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Harry said the Grangers are at Headquarters."

"I know, in fact, I need to go see how they are doing."

"Mum, I think Harry would want everyone to go to Headquarters for safety."

"That's probably a good idea, I'll mention it to your father. You need to come there too."

"When Harry is feeling well enough to travel, we'll go there to find you."

Molly started to argue about her staying at Harry's house all alone, but she considered she didn't have a choice. She was going to have to trust her daughter. "Call me if you need anything else. And Ginny? I'm trusting you to behave yourself."

"Thanks, Mum; I won't let you down." Ginny gave her mum a quick hug and left to return to her boyfriend.

Molly watched her clock for a moment. Ginny's hand went from Home, to Traveling, then back to Home. She did not understand that because it should have showed "Friend's House". Shaking her head, she went outside to talk to her husband. Ginny was correct. They should pack quickly and leave for a few days at least. That would be safer.

Ginny went back to Potter Manor, and up to the master bedroom. Tonight was the first time she had ever been in it. It was incredible. As she walked back into it, she also realized how alone Harry looked lying there. Dobby and Winky were still standing nearby watching him.

"Has he awakened yet?"

"No, Mistress Ginny," Winky replied.

Ginny smiled at that. Both elves had been calling her that all evening. It was amusing to her in some way, and very thrilling in another. It was also interesting they had not called her that the last time she had been here.

The first thing she did was to remove the bandages and use the potion to close the wound. There was a thin pink line when the wound was healed. She really hoped it would heal to be normal-looking. Then she had Dobby and Winky help her to turn him over onto his back so she could raise him up to give him the other two potions.

After that, they helped her to remove his coat and other clothes down to his boxers. Ginny did her best to have the mindset of a nurse and



be objective about it all, but it was her boyfriend and she thought he was incredible looking. In the end, thinking of him like a brother helped her the most. She almost peeked under his boxers anyway, but the presence of the elves stopped her.

Once he was in bed and merely resting, there was not much else to do but wait. "Winky? Would it be too much trouble to get some hot chocolate? I'd go get it myself, but I don't want to leave Harry."

"Oh, no trouble at all, Mistress Ginny. I be right back." The elf popped out.

In her waiting, a previous question came back to mind. "Dobby?" she looked to the other elf. "Why do you and Winky call me 'Mistress Ginny' now? I was only 'Miz Wheezy' last time I was here."

"Because you belong to Master Harry, Mistress Ginny."

That made no sense to Ginny, but she could not get anything else out of him. When Winky brought her drink back, she gave the same answer to the question. Ginny just sipped her drink and thought about it as Harry rested. She did have to admit to herself that she liked it here well enough that she would enjoy living here. Of course, this black-haired bloke lying in front of her was a good part of the reason she liked this place.

Ginny heard groaning and "Mistress Ginny?" at the same time. Snapping awake from the light nap she had fallen into, she heard and saw Harry move around slowly and start to wake up. Glancing at her watch, she noticed that it was almost midnight. Harry had slept nearly five hours.

When he finally blinked awake, she was leaning over him. "Harry? How are you feeling?"

"My head hurts."

She grinned. At least he did not give his patented "Fine" answer. "Here's a headache potion. You'll need to sit up slightly."

As Ginny helped him up, Harry realized his chest was bare. Trying to feel where the sheets were touching him, he realized his legs were bare, too. After he drank the potion and lay back down, he asked, "How did I get undressed? I don't remember doing that. Though, now that I think about it, I don't remember anything after getting hit with that spell."

She giggled at that. "Well, it's too bad you don't remember, because you were incredible when you made love to me, Harry." His eyes bugged out and he lay there speechless. She finally laughed. "Ah, gotcha!"

It took a few seconds, but he finally started smiling too. "Yeah, you really had me going. I couldn't imagine how we had done that and I couldn't remember."

"You were in no shape to do anything, Harry. That you even considered it possible was what made it so funny. Anyway, somehow, you managed to touch your Manor key. Since I was hanging on to you, you brought both of us here. With Dobby and Winky's help, we got you up here, undressed and in bed, and pretty much healed. How do you feel now?"

"Other than tired, mostly fine."

"In that case, my mum is quite, uh, vexed with me, and wants us to go to Grimmauld Place now."

"Why?"

"The vexed part or the travel part?"

"Yes."

"She vexed with me because I can come here and no one else can. She's trusting me to behave, but doesn't like having to do that. She's also quite vexed because you're hurt and she can't treat you. It's a mothering thing, you understand?" Harry nodded, so Ginny went on. "That is also why she wants us to come to her, so she can look at you to make sure you're all right, and so she can keep an eye on us."

"Maybe I don't feel that well after all..."

"Harry? I don't think that's a good idea. If we had a good reason, all right. But she's been strained a lot tonight and we shouldn't push it. I don't expect you to give her the secret to the Manor, as much as I know she'll ask you to, or else to revoke me from the secret, but understand that's something she's going to talk to you about. I also think we're going to have to explain about you and James. I wasn't thinking very clearly and hugged and kissed you in front of all of them. That's a problem."

"Anything else I should expect?"

"Not that I can think of, but just be ready," she told him. "If there are things you don't want to explain, then don't, it's your life. Of course, that may cause problems with my parents too; but I'm all right with whatever you want to do. No matter what, I'll still stand by you."

Harry thought about all that, and also about how he felt right now. Now, he felt safe, and having Ginny with him here in this house was part of that. Going anywhere else made him feel less safe. That was partially because of what happened tonight, but mainly from what he saw in Snape's mind. He did not want to take her anywhere because she was the most precious thing in the world to him now, but he realized she had a point about her parents.

Ginny saw him thinking everything through and waited. Finally he answered her. "I don't want to do that as it's not as safe there, but if we must, then I guess we will. Why don't you go downstairs. I'll take a shower and get dressed, plus I need to take a few minutes to lose some memories. Guess I'll need some clothes if I'm staying there for a day or two."

"See you in a little bit then. I'll go tell them we're coming."

Nearly twenty minutes later, he came down the stairs with a small bag of clothes. "Ready?"

"Yes. You be ready too, Harry. They have questions about tonight."

"They who?" he asked tentatively.

"Everyone. No one has gone to bed yet. Mum has a late night dinner for us though," she told him, hoping that would help.

The thought of some good food did help, but only a little. Harry pulled out the Black key, and after Ginny put her arms around him and gave him a quick kiss, he Portkeyed them to Headquarters.

They found everyone down in the kitchen. Walking hand-in-hand, they went to the table, but the two empty chairs were not next to one another. Bill had come over too, and since he was single and sitting next to an empty chair, Harry asked, "Bill, would you be so kind as to swap chairs so we can have these two together?"

The eldest Weasley boy looked at Harry for a moment, before he silently moved. Harry sat, but Ginny was helping her mother get two plates of food together.

As Ginny sat down and gave Harry a plate, Molly also sat and asked the first question of them. "I'm not sure who I want to ask this of, but will one of you please explain why you two are acting like you're dating, when James was introduced to us as Ginny's boyfriend?" Hermione looked very interested in this too.

Ginny looked at Harry. "I'll take this one. Eat since you'll have to talk more later." Turning to her mother, she said, "It's easy to explain. Both are my boyfriend..."

"WHAT?!" Ron shouted.

"Ron, shut up for a minute. Both are my boyfriend because they are the same person." She got many confused looks. "All right, how about this, James is Harry in disguise, he's Harry's alter-ego."

Harry stopped eating for a moment. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. I'm really sorry for deceiving you when I was James, but I had a good reason."

"And what would that reason be?" Molly Weasley asked calmly but firmly.

Ginny looked to Harry, who only nodded. "As you know, Harry went into hiding this summer. While good in some ways, as he was safer, it was also bad, in that it was harder to know what was going on in the world. James was his disguise and a way for him to safely come out of hiding when he needed to."

"I see," her mother said, as she thought about what she wanted to ask next. "So the relationship between you two is all an act?"

"At first, yes. We made up James from an old childhood memory of mine. Harry wrote me lots of letters as James, and we acted like good friends. After a while though, we discovered that we really did like each other," Ginny explained.

"You mean I discovered I liked you. I believe you always like me, I just didn't know," Harry corrected her as he finished off his plate and started taking things from her plate.

"Hey! That's my food." She slapped at his hand. About half the people smiled, the other half wasn't sure if they were still mad at them or not.

He grinned at her. "You can get more when I'm talking. I'm still hungry." Ginny sighed and pushed her plate towards him.

"So Ginny, why is it that you know how to get to Harry's house?" Her mother continued the questioning. Ginny looked to her boyfriend.

Harry swallowed, then pushed a partially empty plate back to her. "Because Ginny is one of the people who has been helping me hide. In her case, she's been telling me what has been going on at school, to people, and generally giving me advice. I allowed her to come over so she could give me that information. That's also why I gave her the owl. It was also a safe place for her to hide in an emergency should she be attacked."

A grudging smile came to Bill. "I'm really impressed. You really put a lot of effort and planning into all this, didn't you Harry?"

"Yes." There was so much more, but he would not say it.

"Harry, I would like you to take Ginny off the whatever you have that allows her to go into your house," Molly requested.

"I understand, Mrs. Weasley, but I'm afraid I can't do that. It would be like telling Ginny she is no longer one of my advisors and I don't trust her anymore." Harry explained as calmly as he could.

The mother's eyes narrowed. "Then I would like access to your house."

"Why?"

She sputtered as she could not believe Harry was asking that. "Because, it's not appropriate."

Harry looked at her and gave her a thoughtful look. "That doesn't really explain anything, it's just a label. So what's the real reason why?" He was reasonably sure he knew, but he wanted Mrs. Weasley to state it.

Harry calmly waited, though he noted that everyone from Bill on down wore amused looks, while all the older adults gave him incredulous looks. "What is the concrete reason, the thing that we can measure, why?"

Molly finally answered, "Because boys and girls your age aren't supposed to be alone together."

Harry sighed. "Mrs. Weasley, that's not a reason either as that happens all the time anyway. You're just restating the question. I'm starting to believe you won't answer the question, therefore, I feel no obligation to answer a non-existent question."

"Now listen here young man, I asked you a question and I expect an answer." Molly was getting upset with his rebelliousness.

"No ma'am," he replied calmly. "There is no question. Saying something is not appropriate says there is a standard to judge an action by; it is a label. So I'm asking, what is the standard? What is the action you're concerned about and want to monitor? Given that, I'll answer whether you have anything to worry about." Harry could tell the twins were about to burst from holding in their comments, and strangely, that gave him resolve to keep going.

"Very well; I'm concerned about you two getting into bed together. Satisfied?" She was almost yelling.

Harry continued in his calm tone. "Thank you. That makes it very clear and easy to answer. You should not worry. I have no plans for that for the foreseeable future. Not only are we not ready for that, but I feel that would hurt our relationship, and I very desperately do not want that. Nothing is more important to me than Ginny, and that includes making sure I don't hurt her and drive her away." Harry was not thrilled in having to say all that, as it seemed fairly private, but it had seemed necessary.

When Mrs. Weasley did not say anything, Harry asked her, "One more thing, what activities could we possibly do at my house that we couldn't do at Hogwarts? You've let her be alone with boys there for the last four and a half years." Ginny looked worried as he said that, as if she thought she would not be allowed to return to school.

In the lingering silence that had followed Harry, Ron asked, "We don't get to come see you either mate?"

"I'm sorry Ron, and Hermione, but not yet. I will let you in the future, but while you're at school, I don't see a need to add you to the access list. If I need to for your safety, I will do so without hesitation, but at this time, it's not necessary. Please understand, I'm not trying to hurt you by excluding you, but I'm working on a very limited need-to-know basis right now. That being said, I would appreciate it if everyone kept everything discussed about me and Ginny private. That means you can't share it with anyone, no exceptions." Harry looked at Ron as he finished.

"Why are you looking at me?" Ron asked.

"Because I'm wondering how well you'll keep my secrets. To be honest, it's far too easy to make you talk." Ron looked indignant. "Really Ron, everyone knows it. It's just like how we confirmed you and Hermione were dating."

"Now look who's telling secrets!"

"Ooh, Ron's got a girlfriend," George said.

"Wonder how many broom closets they know about?" Fred teased.

"Will you two lay off? Like we need to use a broom closet for private time," Ron said with disgust.

"See what I mean Ron? You just told everyone that you two are dating and that you snog. We didn't even have to work that hard to get it out of you," Harry told him.

Ron seemed to be having to work through that logic, while Hermione just hung her head. Mr. and Mrs. Granger started looking at Ron a little differently. Ginny was holding her fist over her mouth as if yawning, but she seemed to be pressing very hard and her shoulders were shaking.

"I have a question now," Harry said, trying to change the topic. "What happened to Snape?"

"I'm sorry, Harry, but he died," Arthur told him.

Harry did not look sorry, in fact, he looked happy. "Well, that means he can't escape."

Molly looked distressed again. "But Harry, a man died in our garden."

"I sympathize with you on it being your garden, but think of it as an act of war. Remember, Mrs. Weasley, he was there to kill you. OK, maybe not at first, torture would have come first, but killing you later



would have happened. And not just you either, but your entire family. Do you still think kindly of him now?" Harry asked.

"Why would you think that Harry?" Arthur asked. "Albus has always said he was on our side."

"Which leads me to ask, does the Headmaster know Snape attacked you and that he was killed?" Harry wanted to know.

Arthur answered, "He does know Severus is dead, and that it happened during a Death Eater attack on our house, but I don't know about anything beyond that. Why do you ask?"

"Because I looked into Snape's mind. Beyond all the filth there, I found that he was a double-agent. He was working both sides."

"What? How could he do that? Why would he do that?" Arthur wanted to know.

"Because he could? Because he was a sick person? He played both sides to his advantage, both financially and for fun. He was a very sick person."

"You sure, Harry?" Bill asked. At Harry's look, Bill hastily added, "Not that I don't believe that of him, as I didn't like him either, but Dumbledore was so sure we could trust him."

"I don't know how he convinced Dumbledore, you'll have to ask him; though I wonder if you'd get a complete and honest answer. But I had Snape wide open. He was in so much pain after I broke his leg, that he could not maintain a good mental shield."

"You finally mastered Occlumency and Legilimency, didn't you?" Hermione blurted out.

"Not saying," Harry replied with a grin, "but please don't even voice the speculation again." Harry managed to avoid looking at Ron, to give his friend some credit. "Anyway, Mr. Weasley, if you would be sure Professor Dumbledore gets that information tonight, I would

appreciate it. I have more information to share, but it is for your next Order meeting only."

"Certainly, Harry. I'll Floo him shortly," the man told him.

"Now, I have one more thing to discuss before I go to bed, well, two, but the second one is fast," Harry said. "First, Mr. and Mrs. Granger, I'm sorry this meeting is not under more pleasant circumstances, as I had expressed when we last met. You are free to stay here in this house as long as you like. That being said, you will have to decide what you want to do, and I see only two options for you."

"Fight or move," Hermione softly said.

"Basically correct, though there are some variations," Harry added. "You can try to continue on with life and don't let Voldemort win by not letting you live semi-normally. Or you can decide you've had enough, sell your business and your house, and move to the continent or perhaps further, until the war is over."

"You said there were some variations. What did you mean?" Mr. Granger asked.

"In the 'fight and live on' category, you could sell your house and live here, but you'd be vulnerable every time you went to work. You could help that, but not totally solve it by buying guns and taking lessons on how to use them, and getting licensed to carry them everywhere. I don't think magic is strong enough to stop a bullet, and we wizards just don't use guns. Guns are not a perfect and full answer, but it does help you level the playing field."

"I'm not fond of guns Harry, and I don't think my wife would do that." Mrs. Granger agreed she would not have any part of guns around her.

"If you don't have something to protect yourself, then tonight's events could repeat at any time. Another variation is that you move by going into hiding here. You become a virtual prisoner in this house until the war is over. I do not recommend the action, as the last person that tried went somewhat stir-crazy from restlessness, but it is an option.

Problem is, we don't know how long the war will last. Hermione can probably come up with other variations given time," Harry suggested.

Mr. Granger looked thoughtful, "I see, and how long do we have to decide?"

"As I said, you can stay here as long as you need, it's totally up to you," Harry told him.

Now Harry turned his attention to Ginny's parents. "My last item for tonight concerns sleeping arrangements. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, I believe there's an extra bedroom on the third floor. You're welcome to it. Fred and George, I think you already have a room up there. Bill, find whatever room you want on the third floor. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, I would suggest you move from your room on the third floor, and take Sirius' old room on the second floor."

"Why is that Harry?" Molly wanted to know. She was still a bit bothered from earlier. Harry wasn't going to help that.

"Because, in about fifteen minutes or so, I'm going to close off access to the second floor, which would leave Hermione and Ginny in their room, and Ron and I in our room, all by ourselves. I thought you might like to be nearby," Harry explained.

"Why would you do that?" Molly was starting to get her feathers ruffled again.

"Because I'm not at my safe house, and I want to feel safer. Too many people can come into this house. So, you're welcome to come join us on our floor, if you wish. Whether you do or not, I will erect wards to block the second floor off until I get up in the morning." He rose and pulled Ginny up.

"Why Harry?" Molly asked.

"Because, Mrs. Weasley." Harry found the role reversal funny, so he smiled at her. "If you're still awake enough, I'll tell you tonight after we're all settled in. If not, I'll tell you in the morning." He led his girlfriend out of the kitchen and towards the bedrooms.

Ginny whispered. "I can't believe how much you're pushing Mum. Careful Harry; she will eventually snap, and it won't be pretty."

"Perhaps my explanation should wait until morning then." As they got upstairs, Harry stopped at the girl's room. "I don't want to stay here Ginny, it's not safe enough, not only for me, but for you. Nevertheless, I will do this for you. But be warned, if anything starts happening, I will grab you and take you away to safety. I care for you that much."

"Harry, I can take care of myself."

"I know, but then again, I care for you too much," Harry admitted. "It's one of my flaws perhaps. Hopefully, nothing will happen, but if it does, you can hex me afterward. OK?"

Mrs. Weasley came up the stairs with bedding, and her husband came up shortly thereafter with their bags.

"Mr. Weasley. If you don't mind, I'd like to wait until morning for more explanations. I think we're all pretty tired," Harry told him.

"That's probably a good idea Harry. We're all here for the night, so go ahead and do what you must for safety. I do look forward to the explanation tomorrow." The man followed his wife, while Harry turned to the entranceway that led to this floor. Five minutes later, he was happy with his ward work, including an Anti-Apparation ward, and went to bed. Each of the six on that floor had an uneventful night's sleep.

A/N: Quick Magical Theory note. How did Harry lose the memories from Snape? My theory is that when one deposits a memory in a container (e.g. in a Pensieve) the person is putting a copy there. So after Harry pulled off the memories into containers, there were now two copies of the "bad memories". So he needs to get rid of those, while still remembering the facts in them. The useful memories, like the spells he learn were remembered again in their entirety, so they are in a second place in his mind, then he reviewed the bad ones so he had the facts of them in another place in his mind, then he Obliviated the timeframe of when he was retrieving the memories from Snape with Legilimency. Complicated, but it seems to work for

me. :-) That allowed Harry to lose the "nastiness" and emotions of the bad memories.

More succinctly: Memories are time oriented, as are memories of memories (which are in a different place on the timeline), and Obliviation removes time and whatever is associated with that time from your mind.

## Chapter 11: Secrets

(Wed 25 Dec)

"Harry, wake up! It's Christmas morning!" Ron yelled to get his friend up.

His friend was less than pleased and was tempted to stun him. "Ron, it's only ..." he checked his watch, "eight in the morning."

"So, I've heard Mum and Dad going to the bathroom, so they're up already. It's your own fault mate; you blocked off the stairs. Besides, you should see what Bill is trying to do to your wards."

Harry groaned. Ron had a point, he could not keep everyone up here. Crawling out of bed, he found some clean clothes and put them on. Walking down to the end of the hall, he saw Bill on the other side of the shimmering wall with his wand out and poking the wards.

"So, expert curse breaker, how did I do?" Harry leaned against the wall.

Bill looked up at him. "I've only been looking at it for about twenty minutes, but so far, I can't find an opening. So good job. I see some things I recognize, but they're obscured somehow -- very ingenious. How did you do it?"

With his wand, Harry made a small cut on his finger and touched the shimmering wall. The smear of blood hung there for a brief moment before it disappeared.

"You used a blood ward?" Bill paled slightly at the thought of what that could have done to him had he really tried to force his way past.

Harry just grinned and waved his wand a few times, the shimmering went away.

Bill put his hand out slowly, and it was still stopped in mid-air. "How many layers do you have?"

"Just one more." Harry touched his finger to the invisible wall in the air smearing more blood on it, then it too disappeared.

"Two blood wards? What were you thinking?"

"Waste not, want not," Harry replied as he healed the cut. "I already had the blood available and knew how powerful blood wards are, so why not have two of them?" He turned around and passed Ron who was rushing down for breakfast. Coming to the girl's room, he knocked.

As Ron yelled across the hall, Hermione looked over and saw Ginny slowly blinking. "I guess we might as well get up too, Ginny."

Ginny yawned and stretched. "Yeah, he may be about to turn seventeen, but when it comes to Christmas, I think he'll always be a little boy at heart."

Hermione giggled. "Yes, it's part of what makes him so adorable."

"You really like him, don't you?"

The brunette slowly got out of bed to get dressed. "Yes. He drives me crazy at times, but there's something about him that really appeals to me. I think it's the way he approaches life. He so much less serious about it, and I need that to balance me. What about you and Harry?"

Ginny grinned. "Like you really have to ask that? I've been waiting for him to come around since I was ten. And lately, he's just gotten even better. It's like he's grown up overnight. In some ways, he so serious, so focused it's almost scary. Yet, he can also be incredibly playful and fun. And when he holds me, I never want him to let go."

A sigh escaped Hermione. "I know..."

"Huh?"

Hermione blushed and looked down, not able to meet her friend's eyes. "Sorry Ginny, it's just that when he came to rescue us, he grabbed me in a hug to Portkey away. He told me to hug him around

the neck, but I didn't want to. Then he shouted at me in a voice that gave me no option and when I did, he grabbed me in a hug and we left. Feeling his strong arms around me was something else. I like it when Ron holds me, but Harry was much different, it was like I was safe from everything. I'm sorry Ginny, I hope you're not angry with me," she said contritely.

Ginny chuckled. "Hermione, it was like for five seconds or something, right?" She got a nod. "And it's wasn't like anything was happening; I mean, he was rescuing you with your parents standing there, right?" She got another nod. "And Harry has hugged you before, along with Luna, and my mum. It's all right. I'm not upset."

"You're not?"

"Nope, and I do understand having felt those arms around me. They, and the rest of his parts, are amazing."

Now Hermione giggled and finally faced her friend again. "Thanks for understanding, Ginny. It was so embarrassing for some reason."

"Really, Hermione. Look at it from Harry's point of view. I think he sees you as something like a sister or at least a cousin."

Ginny got up and started getting dressed as her friend thought about that. Just as Ginny was decent, there was a knock on her door. Hermione answered it.

There stood Harry. "Uh, I just wanted to say that you can go down now if you want. I've taken the wards down."

"Thanks, Harry. Did Ron go downstairs already?"

"Yeah, straight for the food," Harry answered.

"Thanks, I'll go join him." Hermione left to have breakfast with her boyfriend and parents.



Ginny came over and threw her arms around his neck and gave him a tight hug, enjoying the feel of his muscles underneath. "Let me go to the bathroom and do a few things there, and I'll join you."

"I'll go tell your parents they can go down and I'll wait for you." Harry did not want to be separated from her. He knew he was heading into a problem with that line of thinking, but he couldn't help it right now. Perhaps after their talk later, Ginny could help him think better.

Soon, everyone had at least a minimal breakfast and headed into the living room with the Christmas tree and the presents. The Grangers were surprised their presents were there too.

"Some of our friends retrieved them for you last night along with your clothes," Arthur explained.

Harry liked Ginny's present. It was a double picture frame with photos of her. One was her in normal clothes, and in the other she was very dressed up. Both Ginnys waved to him and blew him kisses. They were two very different looks, yet Harry liked them both.

Ginny was happy with the way it turned out, though not with what she had to go through to get them. Getting Colin to take them had been easy. Getting Colin to promise he had not kept a copy had been very hard. They had a very long talk about them, or rather Colin's view of wanting them together. Ginny thought she had gotten through to Colin that they would always be just friends, but she was not totally sure, either.

When Ginny opened her gift from Harry, she was stunned, along with everyone else in the room. She held in her hands a black dragon hide coat just like Harry's. "I can't believe you did this Harry; and it's even in my size," she told him as she tried it on.

"I wanted you to be safe, as I think my coat proved last night." Harry tugged at it so it sat correctly on her. "I got hit in the back with something last night from someone in the house before they recognized me, and it also stopped that cutting spell, though it did scratch the coat."

"I still can't believe you did this, but I'll wear it every time I go out." She walked up to her boyfriend and gave him a kiss, though she purposefully kept it short.

An hour later, she was still wearing the coat as she, Harry, and her parents sat in the library. The room was completely warded for privacy.

Now Harry was nervous, not of the elder Weasleys, but of the youngest Weasley. "I suppose I should say I'm sorry for what I'm about to say Ginny, and I hope you don't hex me too badly. But please hear me out before you do anything, OK?"

Ginny would have thought an opening like that meant he was going to try to do something stupidly noble like break up with her, but he was holding her hand so tightly, she could not have pulled away even if she had wanted to. Not knowing what else to do, she nodded.

"Right. Well, I suppose I need to get on with it," Harry said with resignation. "One of the things I learned from Snape last night is the reason for the attacks. It was because Voldemort was trying to flush me out by attacking my friends."

Arthur cleared his throat uncomfortably. "If I may, Harry, I should probably tell you that the Longbottoms and the Lovegoods were also attacked last night. I didn't want to tell you when you arrived, so much had happened; but Albus told me when I called him with your information."

"And?"

"I'm afraid that Neville's Gran was killed. Neville was hurt pretty badly before help arrived, but he is in St. Mungo's and is expected to recover. He'll go live with his Uncle Algie, I understand." Arthur's look grew worse. "I'm afraid it was worse at the Lovegoods. Luna's father was killed trying to defend her, and Luna was tortured with the Cruciatus Curse. While she is not insane, she probably will not be at Hogwarts all term as she will be spending several months with Mind Healers."

Harry hung his head. He was trying desperately not to feel guilty because he had not done the harm, yet if it was not for him, his friends would not have been attacked. He felt his hand being squeezed, and he looked up to see Ginny trying to give him a comforting smile.

"It's not your fault, Harry. You're doing the right thing," she told him.

He gave her a grim smile as he said, "Then I hope you think I'm doing the right thing now too." He squeezed her hand back as he went on. "The goal of last night really was not to get me; they did not expect to find me there. The goal was to hurt your family as they knew I was close to you, and more specifically, it was to kill Hermione to demoralize us and to kidnap Ginny. Voldemort felt I would go after him to rescue Ginny."

The three Weasleys were shocked and said nothing, Ginny also went very pale.

"My thought is that Hermione will probably be fine at school. However, I need to start training Ginny to defend herself better as she could be attacked again, especially once our relationship becomes known. That training can best be done if she takes a leave of absence from school for the next term, moves to my safe house, and trains with Moony and me."

"Absolutely not!" Molly objected, her emotions ruling her thinking. She was also starting to wonder if these two were more serious than she first thought.

As calmly as he could, he asked, "So having her less than fully trained, kidnapped, tortured, and killed is acceptable? It's not to me."

"But you don't know that will happen, Harry."

"It's already been tried once last night, Mrs. Weasley. Why do you think it won't be tried again?"

Molly sat there unable to say anything at all to that logic, but she knew she did not like the idea he had presented, no matter how much she liked the boy.

"That is my preference, but there are a few other alternatives. Ginny could leave school, live at home and come to my house every day to be trained. That leaves her vulnerable at night and puts you at risk by having her there, but at least she would get the training. If you did this, I would ask you to put your house under a Fidelius Charm to make her safe at night." Harry waited, but they did not comment.

"A third option is that I attempt to convince Dumbledore to let me return to school and change Ginny's schedule so I can take over her training there for some of her classes, while she attends the rest of her classes like normal. I don't like that, but I feel I'm now capable of handling that situation and I'd be willing to do it for her. That is of course dependent on Dumbledore's willingness to cooperate, which is not assured."

"Of the options presented so far, I think I'm most comfortable with that one," her father said.

"Option four is that Ginny decides that I'm not worth it and gives up on me. It would help to very publicly renounce me to reduce the likelihood of being a target. I like this the least because it would hurt me greatly." Harry looked down for a moment contemplating that and the fact that he thought there was the possibility that he would not be able to complete his final task in that state of mind. "Ginny, your opinion is the most important. What do you think?" He could not look at her now that he had said all that.

Ginny slowly reached over with her free hand and lifted his head. Looking into his eyes, she announced, "Option four will not happen, Harry. I will not give you up. I'll learn whatever I have to, and do whatever I have to, to keep you."

He smiled and squeezed her hand in appreciation.

"I like your first option the best," she told him, "but I think the third one where I return to school is probably the most practical. I don't know

how to convince the Headmaster or Professor McGonagall to change my schedule, but if you can do that, I'm willing."

"Perhaps if we speak to the Professors, we could help convince them, but I'm sure their first question will be similar to mine," Arthur told him. "How can you teach her everything you need to? You haven't even graduated yourself."

Harry smiled. "I can teach her because I could pass my NEWTs in Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, and even in Potions right now if I had to." They looked at him in disbelief. "I know that sounds outlandish, but when you've been doing nothing by studying with individual instruction for over five months, you can learn a lot, if you try hard enough. And I've been motivated with self-preservation," Harry added with chagrin. "So my not having to take those classes will give me time to teach Ginny in those same classes."

"That still seems like a tall order Harry," Arthur said.

"I know, but I also won't be doing it alone. I will have Moony to help me, and he has been an instructor at Hogwarts before," Harry pointed out. "You don't have to decide now -- just before the beginning of next term."

Her parents left, and Ginny moved to sit on his lap. She softly kissed him before she rested her forehead against his. "This is all so sudden and intense, it's hard to know what to think."

"I know. It's like it was back in the summer for me. The changes were so drastic, it was hard for me to keep it all straight. Ginny, I'm so sorry for going so overly protective on you. I know you don't like that, and yet I can't help it. You've become so precious to me over the last month or so."

"Honestly, I don't like it in some ways, but I've also been so overwhelmed since last night, I also like it. You make me feel safe. I know that's contradictory and probably sounds stupid, but it's what I feel," Ginny admitted.

"Think about it and try to work out what you want with your parents. I'll do my best to do what works best for you, and to give up enough of my protectiveness that I'll let you out of my sight, at least for short periods of time," he told her with a smile.

"You mean like long enough to go to the loo?" she teased him.

"No, I think I'll go there with you, that could be interesting," he told her mischievously. "After all, you got to see me in my boxers." She giggled at his tease and kissed him some more.

(Fri 27 Dec)

Albus Dumbledore arrived at the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix nearly twenty minutes early, which was unusual for him. He was a firm believer in arriving exactly on time and never waiting around. Yet tonight, he had a very important task to do before the meeting, or at least it seemed important after all the hours he had contemplated this issue. He desperately needed to start rebuilding the bridge back to Harry, and tonight seemed like the time.

He had given the young man and the relationship between the two of them a great deal of thought over the last couple of months. Albus thought he had done the right thing over the last sixteen years, but he could now see that from Harry's point of view, without all the information Albus had, that Harry might honestly be unhappy. The disaster with the Dursleys was also completely unexpected. Albus did not understand how anyone but Death Eaters could fail to treat family appropriately. Still, Vernon Dursley had done some very wrong things and his wife had not stopped him. At this time, Albus thought that about his only option was to treat Harry like an adult and hope for the best. That was what he had to communicate. Perhaps the relationship between them could be repaired over time.

He walked into the living room and found Harry talking to his friends. "Ah, Harry, might I have a word with you before the meeting tonight?"

"Certainly, Headmaster," Harry coolly replied before he excused himself from his friends' company and followed the older man into the library. He watched the Headmaster wisely put up the necessary privacy charms.

"Harry, I have a couple things to discuss with you before the meeting tonight. First, I hope Arthur told you of the invitation for you to speak to us to give us a report on the attacks from a few nights ago?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excellent. I do thank you for volunteering to do that."

"I suppose you could call it volunteering," Harry said, "but I have information that your organization needs to hear and I would strongly prefer they hear it from me so they can also ask questions."

Albus nodded. "That's fine, and probably a good thing. My other item to discuss is the list of grievances, I believe you called them, that you presented to me at the beginning of this last term." Harry raised an eyebrow at him. "I've given the matter a great deal of thought, helped by my Pensieve, and I can see what you're trying to point out to me, at least in some cases."

"Some?"

"Yes, Harry. To be truthful, most of the items you brought up are quite valid. There are a couple I could quibble with, but for your sake I shall not. So for the actions that I have done that have caused you pain, you have the apologies of an old man who will admit he makes mistakes, some of which were quite large."

"I see." Harry looked very thoughtful. "I might be able to accept that, but it depends on how you plan to act now and in the future."

Dumbledore sighed. "I understand. What good is asking forgiveness if I don't change my ways?" Harry nodded. "I will stop insisting on a number of things, such as your return to the Dursleys every year; instead, I will change that request to your promise to keep yourself safe under a Fidelius charm when you are not at school."

"Such as my present location?"

"I believe so. Are you the secret keeper?" Harry nodded. "Excellent. I also plan to do my best to start treating you more like an adult; I believe a number of the ways I hurt you stemmed from that one failing. Would this help?"

"Yes, sir, it would," Harry agreed.

"If I may suggest it," Dumbledore put forth, "I would also like for us to have some form of regular communication. Since we both have one of those wonderful mirrors, perhaps we could arrange a schedule with them? I can share information with you and I'd like to hope we can get to know one another better. My wish is that we can prevent problems between us this way."

Harry thought about that and saw the benefit to both of them. He had another idea that might be appropriate to bring up, now that he felt he was trained enough to be able to handle the situation. "I am open to communication between us, Professor, but might I suggest a different way?"

"Please do, Harry. There's no reason not to consider other ways that might work better." Albus was trying his best to be accommodating to repair the relationship.

"Given my ultimate goal, I need as much information as possible, including understanding how various events fit together. To that end, I would like to join the Order. I do not need to go on missions, though I am open to that, but I would like to join mostly for information and the chance to ask people questions. We could talk before or after those meetings, if you would like." Harry saw a slight smile on the old man's face.

"I was wondering if you would ask that." Albus pulled out his watch and saw they had only a few minutes left. "I'm not comfortable sending you on missions, as I'm not sure we could keep you safe enough, but I do understand your desire to know information that might help you." He paused in thought, then he smiled. "Why don't you ask about joining after you have given your report. It would need to be discussed by the group anyway, and that's as good a way to bring up the topic as any."



"Thank you, Professor, and I will forgive you for your repeated mistakes now, although I greatly hope not to see those same ones again." He could forgive, but he would not forget, and so he would be on his guard for quite some time.

"Thank you, Harry. I shall endeavor to do the right thing for you. Now, if you'll follow me, we can start the ball rolling, as they say." Albus took his charms down and lead the young man out. He was feeling much better about Harry Potter, though he was under no illusion that things were perfect. At best, "on the mend" seemed like a reasonable label.

Despite Albus Dumbledore's present optimism, when it came down to it, he was not totally sure he wanted Harry to talk to the group tonight as he was unsure how it was going to turn out. He would have preferred to rebuild the bridge some more first. On the other hand, he was sort of forced to do this, considering what he had agreed to, and perhaps it would turn out better than he expected. It was the uncertainty that bothered him the most.

They were the last ones to enter. "I'd like us to begin, as I believe everyone who will be attending is here. As you can see, we have a guest, Harry Potter. He has requested to share some things with us directly, and I believe he has earned that right. Harry?" Albus sat and hoped for the best.

"Thank you, Headmaster. As you all know, there was a planned set of attacks on Christmas Eve. What you may not know is that the goal was to attack my friends in an effort to get to me, both from a morale standpoint, and to draw me out at some future time. While there was loss of innocent life, for which I am deeply saddened, I am thankful my friends did live. Luna Lovegood is the worst off and will be in St. Mungo's for an extended period of time; I truly hope she will fully recover." Harry paused to take a deep breath; this was harder than he had expected.

"During the attack at the Weasley's home, I was there and fought Severus Snape. During the battle, I was able to use Legilimency and break through his mental shields. In doing so, I recovered some

interesting information in addition to what I just told you. While I have made some mental notes on what I saw in his mind, I pulled those memories from my mind shortly after I recovered from my injury and they are stored elsewhere for my own mental balance. The things I saw made me so sick, I wanted to retch every time my thoughts wandered that way. He was a very sick person."

"Harry, what did you find that would help us?" Albus asked.

"I saw various images of where Voldemort is hiding. I did not recognize any of them, but perhaps you would like to view the memories in your Pensieve and see for yourself. You might recognize some of the places. I also found that Snape was a double-agent; he was playing both sides for his own gain."

There were gasps at this.

"Therefore, I would suggest that you change anything he knew about. He may or may not have told Voldemort, but I think you should assume he told all. As for what he told you, some of it was true; some was not. I think you should question the truth of anything he told you - just to be safe. Headmaster, you'll also find that your Potions expenses at Hogwarts will be decreasing dramatically now. He used the potions and ingredients from the school to make his own, which he in turn sold for his own profit. I don't know how you could get that money back from his accounts, but considering he basically stole from the students, I think that would be a nice gesture."

Albus took a deep breath and glanced at Minerva. Her usually stern countenance was very severe now.

"Also at school, I believe you'll find the Slytherins a bit easier to handle. Many of the problems, especially the bullying, were suggested by Snape. I would also suggest you bring in Mind Healers to talk to all the seventh year Slytherin girls. Snape seemed to think that it was an 'exit requirement' for them to, ah, spend some time in his quarters."

"He wouldn't!" Minerva McGonagall was incensed. Harry almost expected to see accidental magic, based on her reaction.

"As I said, he was a very sick man. On the other side, he was a Death Eater because he enjoyed it. It allowed him to torture people and get away with it. I probably saw less than a hundred memories total, but they were enough to make me sick to my stomach. I'll stop here for questions before I make a request." Harry stood patiently, looking around the group. Horror was on most people's faces.

"Albus?" Minerva McGonagall's voice shook slightly with rage. "How could you trust a person like that? What did he tell you that made him trustworthy enough join us in the Order and to allow into a school around children?"

Harry thought those were excellent questions, especially since he had asked similar ones himself four months earlier.

With a deep sigh, Dumbledore said, "As it is now obvious, he deceived me in some way, so I'm not sure I can tell you how I found him trustworthy."

Harry was disappointed, but not surprised, that he did not hear a good answer this time either. From the look on McGonagall's face, he suspected the two of them would be having a rather intense discussion when they returned to Hogwarts. A part of Harry really wished he could witness that conversation.

After nearly half a minute of silence, Harry went on. "Since there are no questions of me, I will ask mine. Since I continue to have Death Eaters and Voldemort himself come after me, I would like to join the fight and become some form of a member of the Order. I feel I have trained enough to do this and can make a difference. I need information to help, and then I'm ready to go on the offensive, as soon as a plan can be developed. So, may I join?"

"I sorry Harry, but you don't meet all the qualifications," McGonagall told him.

"And what are the qualifications? Perhaps I'm only missing one that we can agree doesn't really matter," Harry suggested.

"You must be an adult is the most important one. That would free you from the Restriction on Underage Magic, as well as allow you get an Apparation License," she explained.

"I see. Are those the only qualifications?" Harry wondered.

"Basically, though you must also be voted in by a majority of the group."

"You are correct that I will not be seventeen until the end of this coming July; however, I already have an Apparation License, and I have a waiver from the Restriction on Underage Magic." That got him some shocked looks. "As for being an adult, I don't see where that should be an issue considering I have already helped to capture five Death Eaters in the last two months."

"I take it you want to claim the five from last night?" Albus asked.

"No, I'll only claim four from last night. One of the Weasleys got the other. Though Tonks," he nodded towards her, "didn't recognize me, I also turned in Draco Malfoy."

"You were the one with Ginny?" Tonks exclaimed.

"That was me in disguise. I rarely go into public as myself. I feel that's safer for me and for everyone around me," Harry told them.

McGonagall looked at him. "You're James York, aren't you? I knew something was familiar about you."

Harry smiled. "One of my aliases."

"Perhaps the last qualification is, can you adequately defend yourself?" Albus asked.

"After rescuing the three Grangers, and taking out four Death Eaters at the Weasleys, one of which was Snape, you still ask me that?" Harry couldn't believe it.

"I'm sorry Harry, but we must be certain," Dumbledore told him. "This is a standard question I ask all potential members."

The head of the Order looked steadily at Harry, but Harry felt no brush against his mental shields. "Very well, I'll offer to duel anyone here who wants to. Anyone want to have some fun tomorrow?" Harry asked as blandly as possible.

There were several shaking their heads, one of which was Tonks. "Oh come on Tonks, I know you want to do this."

She laughed. "No I don't, Harry. Remus tells me you've only gotten better since I tried. I value my health too much."

"Ah," he said with a grin, "I was only going to turn your hair green." Tonks laughed and turned her hair lime green herself. It clashed horribly with the orange top she was wearing.

"I believe I'll take you up on your offer, Harry."

Harry turned to the Headmaster. He suddenly understood, this was what the old man had wanted to begin with. "Very well, Headmaster. Where?"

"Why don't you come visit me at my office? There a special room where we can do this in the castle." A twinkle finally came back into the old man's eyes.

"I'd like to come observe, if you don't mind, Mr. Potter," McGonagall said.

"Certainly, Professor. You're welcome to have a chance too," Harry offered her. She only smiled at him.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Potter? If not, we'll let you go so we can finish our meeting."

"No, sir; not for the Order. However, I would like to talk to you and Professor McGonagall before you leave this evening. It is most

important." Harry saw a look of surprise on both of the professors faces. He suspected they were guessing what this was about.

"We'll come find you shortly, Harry."

"Thank you. I hope for a positive response on my request to join. I'll be in the library when you finish here. Good evening to everyone." Harry left feeling pretty good about it all. Even if they declined his request to join, he would still find a way to participate in taking out the Death Eaters.

When Albus and Minerva arrived at the library, not only did they find Harry there, but Ginny was sitting on his lap while they quietly talked. As Albus was about to close the door behind him, Ginny's parents came in. Arthur closed the door, then put up a privacy ward.

"Professors, please have a seat," Harry offered, while Ginny moved to the seat beside Harry. "I'll try to be as brief as possible. Due to the attacks earlier, and the goals of attacking all of my friends, and one fact I didn't tell the Order, I have a request of you. The Death Eaters that visited the Weasleys were ordered to kidnap Ginny in an attempt to get to me. Therefore, I feel it is imperative that she be trained more fully to defend herself. While I have a preference on how to do that, the Weasleys have decided they would prefer that training to happen at Hogwarts while Ginny is in school. Therefore, if I am to train Ginny, I need to be at Hogwarts as well. May I enroll for this second term?"

The professors looked at each other. Albus had suspected this was coming when Harry asked to talk to them, from the look on Minerva's face, apparently she had not thought of this. Albus told him, "That would be highly unusual Harry. I'm not sure how you could keep up in your classes as you've missed far too much work to make up."

"Actually, Sir, I only need to take two classes. The rest of the time I would use to train Ginny, as well as advance my own training. I say that because Remus believes I could take my NEWTs in Defense, Charms, Transfiguration, and Potions now and pass. Therefore, I would only enroll in Herbology and Care of Magical Creatures. Neither of those classes normally builds up on knowledge presented

earlier, or at least they didn't in my first five years. That being said, I would seek out tutors to catch me up."

"Do you really feel you could take your NEWTs in those subjects now, Mr. Potter?" McGonagall was getting past her shock and becoming a professor again.

"Yes, Professor." He pulled out his wand and conjured a small table with a lacy tablecloth and napkins. With another spell, a complete tea set of six cups, saucers, silverware, and finally a teapot with a bowl of sugar cubes and a creamer appeared. "I read about this in the seventh year book, except that it suggested three spells instead of the two I used. I would not be surprised to find that you could do it in one spell, Professor, but I think I have demonstrated that I have the ability to work at the NEWT level."

"In this area at least." Her voice softened as she admired his work.

"I will admit Potions is my weakest area, and on the NEWT I would probably get only an Exceeds Expectations or maybe an Average, but I would pass. It was hard to make up for what Snape didn't teach me, but I've had some very good tutors these last few months."

"Hmm, I don't recall Remus being that good in Potions," McGonagall told him. "Who did you have tutoring you?"

Harry smiled. "Believe it or not, the Weasley twins are very good in Potions, and surprisingly good teachers."

Albus' eyes twinkled as he heard that. "Actually, I would believe it. Now that is your request, how do you see this affecting Miss Weasley?"

"She would get a new timetable. I would instruct her in Defense, Charms, and Transfiguration my way. By the end of the term, not only will she be able to easily pass her OWLs in those subjects, but I believe she'll be able to take her NEWTs in those too, if that's allowed." Harry looked at the shock on the professor's faces, he only smiled.

"I don't think that's possible," the Headmaster said.

"No? Then please explain how I learned more than what I plan to teach her in a little more than five months, and I believe Ginny is smarter than I am. The second term is about that long as well, so she should have the time needed. Granted, I didn't have the extra classes she'll be taking, but as I said, she'll be learning a little less, so I think it's doable," Harry said with some fervor.

"Miss Weasley," McGonagall addressed the girl. "You've been very silent in all of this. What do you think?"

"I believe I can do it Professor," Ginny answered. "In addition to the changes Harry said, I would also be giving the DA back to him, so that will give me a little more time for school work. I know I will have very little free time, but I do understand this to be important. Though I enjoy it, I have also considered dropping my Astronomy class; it doesn't really help me in the war, nor do I see myself going into a job that requires it."

"Arthur? Molly? How do you feel about all of this?" Albus asked them.

The father answered. "While we wished it did not have to happen, we've accepted the fact that our daughter is mixed up in this war, just like the rest of the family. Therefore, we do want her to be as able as possible to protect herself." Molly grimly nodded, seeing the necessity but not liking it.

"Let us talk about it and we'll let you know," the Headmaster told them. "We'll see you at ten tomorrow in my office Harry; I'll set it up so you can Floo in. Oh, and Mr. Potter? Welcome to the Order of the Phoenix."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, Professor. I think my joining will be mutually beneficial."

"I hope it works out well. Good-night," Dumbledore bid them as he rose. While he was not sure letting Harry into the Order was the best thing, he considered it an olive branch to the boy and hoped for the



best. It did not escape his notice that he was having to do a lot of hoping where Harry was concerned lately.  
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Harry really wanted to wear his dragon hide coat for this, but he left it at home. With a kiss for good luck from his girlfriend, he Flooed to the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts.

As he came out of the fireplace, he surprised himself by not feeling that angry about being here. Perhaps his time away had been good for him. He also found that he was not nearly as angry towards the Headmaster as he had been, but he was not friends with him either. Maybe a working relationship described it best, he thought.

"Good morning, Headmaster, Professor McGonagall," he said evenly to the two professors there.

"Good morning, Harry," the Headmaster replied. McGonagall nodded her greeting. "Shall we go up to the seventh floor?" He led the way.

McGonagall walked beside Harry after they had gone down the stairs to the corridor. "Do you miss being here, Harry?"

"Yes, Professor, at least in some ways. I like where I live now and the freedom I have; yet Hogwarts was the first place I thought of as home. I suppose it will always have a special place in my heart for that reason."

Thinking back to a time when she watched a baby being placed on a doorstep, and her objection at doing that, she suddenly regretted very much not making more of an objection. "I understand. Please tell me, Harry, how do you plan to be able to cover two and a half years of material in a half a year? I'm quite curious about your claim to teach Miss Weasley that much material."

"I spent a solid eight hours a day, five days a week, in class learning this last term, with more time spent reading; that is much more than is done here. Individual instruction allows for a great increase in speed, as the teacher can tailor the lessons to the student, a luxury you don't

have in a normal class. Also, we found no need to take the time to write lengthy essays on the subject matter. That does not mean the research was skipped, or was not discussed, just that we didn't find a need to waste three or four hours on writing when an intense half hour discussion on the research was actually better for understanding and memory retention -- at least for me. I believe it will be similar for Ginny," Harry explained. "Instead of reinforcing the information by writing essays, the reinforcement is done with hands-on testing, generally through duels. Lastly, I only have to do this accelerated learning for three classes, not on her whole course load."

"Most interesting. I can see your point, and I'll be curious as to how it turns out. I have wondered for some time how quickly we could teach the standard curriculum if we had smaller classes grouped by learning ability." McGonagall and Harry watched Dumbledore pace in front of the wall for the Room of Requirement, now that they were there.

Going inside, they found an empty room in light blue. "The walls should be protected from most spells, so the castle does not get damaged," Dumbledore told them. "No lethal spells, obviously. Any other rules, Harry?"

"I like the rule that we should try to keep the damage down to no more than two or three days in the hospital. Keeping dangerous, but non-lethal spells to the limbs only is probably a good idea too. I trust Madam Pomfrey to be able to regrow an arm bone after a Reducto on it, but a Reducto to the chest is not a pleasant thought," Harry said very soberly.

The Headmaster nodded. "Yes, very prudent and quite acceptable, this is only a test after all." The Headmaster pulled out his wand. "Minerva, you are on your own for blocking spells that may come your way. Harry? Are you ready?"

Harry had been stretching a little, no need to pull a muscle. He had no cloak on, but wore a T-Shirt and jumper, along with his jeans and trainers. He looked at the Headmaster in his long robes, which looked like they would get in the way, and answered, "Professor McGonagall? Would you start us please?"

She looked at both of them for a moment, then simply said, "Begin." The next two minutes provided her with one of the most amazing duels she had ever seen. Albus' great wealth of knowledge, as well as experience, was a strength he used to his advantage. Still, he was having trouble hitting Harry. Harry's mobility and agility allowed him to dodge almost every spell Albus sent at him, and the others he blocked. She was starting to think the winner would be determined by physical stamina, and that would obviously be Harry.

Finally, Minerva saw Albus hit Harry in the wand hand with a Bludgeoning spell and she thought that would end it, but Harry kept on as if nothing had happened. The spell must have missed after all, she thought. Then Harry rolled on the floor dodging a Body Bind and shot a Jelly Legs at the Headmaster's knees. She thought that was a strange thing for Harry to do, until she saw him immediately conjure a number of marbles as the Headmaster started jumping over the jinx. When the Headmaster came back down, he could not keep his balance on the little round objects and slipped, falling hard on his back. That pause was all Harry needed and a Body Bind hit the Headmaster and the match was over.

Harry got up off the floor, breathing hard but not panting. "Professor, can I get you to help the Headmaster? I need to take care of something else." He carefully switched the wand to his left hand, though he winced, and started waving it over his right hand.

"Is something the matter, Mr. Potter?"

"Just my hand. I think he broke it." Harry was doing more spells to his hand, then he suddenly looked more relaxed and smiled. "There, all better now."

So Albus had hit his hand after all, he was just good enough to go on. She was impressed. "You've learned some of the healing spells?"

"I've learned the basics. The hard stuff I'll leave to Madam Pomfrey, but healing a cut or simple break in the field can be a tactical advantage. That is especially true if your opponent can not do that, so they have to work around their injuries and you do not have that

liability." Harry flexed his hand a few times and was satisfied. That done, he looked down at the Headmaster, who was still frozen. With a wave of his wand, Harry unfroze the old man.

The Headmaster was able to move again, and slowly got up. "Nice trick Harry, my congratulations." Once standing, he Vanished all the marbles on the floor, so he would not slip again.

Harry saw the Headmaster moving like an old man for the first time in his life. As Harry watched him walk over, it appeared the old man was in pain, then Harry understood that the Headmaster must have landed on some of the marbles. "If you'll turn around Headmaster, I'll help you out."

"No problem Harry. I'll have Madam Pomfrey check me out later."

"Really, Sir, it's not a problem." Harry walked around behind the Headmaster and did a diagnostic spell. "You have multiple bruises and what looks to be a cracked hip. I could fix the break, but I think I'll leave the bone for the nurse. I can help you with the bruises now." Harry waved his wand several times around the Headmaster's back and head. "There, that should help some, although you do need to go see the nurse as soon as possible."

"Thank you, Harry, that helps more than I expected. Now, I shall submit a copy of Minerva's memory of this duel for your NEWT on Defense." The Headmaster surprised Harry with that, and with what came next. "You indicated you could take four NEWTs now. If you had to take a fifth NEWT, what subject do you think you could pass?"

"Probably Care of Magical Creatures, Hagrid seemed to present material on the more dangerous animals before he should have, or so it seemed to me," Harry told him, and that got a chuckle from both professors. "Why do you ask?"

"Why don't you explain, Minerva? It was your idea." The Headmaster proceeded to conjure the squishiest armchair Harry had ever seen and slowly lowered himself into it as the Deputy Headmistress took over.

"Mr. Potter, if you could pass five NEWTs, that would make you a fully qualified wizard. Given that, and the ability you just demonstrated, we could make you an offer for a job here at the castle. That would give the access you need, as well as fill a hole on our staff that you, however inadvertently, created."

As Harry stared at her in shock, Dumbledore waved his wand and a chintz chair appeared behind the boy. "Have a seat, Harry. There's no need for you to fall over and hurt yourself, plus, this may take a few minutes."

Harry dutifully sat as he tried to work through what he had just heard. "Are you serious? You'd make me a professor?"

"An assistant professor actually; that's due to your age. You would teach the Defense Against the Dark Arts classes under the direction of the Headmaster, or so that will be the official explanation. In reality, the Headmaster is a busy man and will rarely be there." McGonagall also tacked on, "That is assuming you do pass five NEWTs."

"Right," Harry said absent-mindedly as he continued to think through it all. "Wait! They only do NEWT testing once a year. How can I take my NEWTs now, before the second term starts?"

"I believe I can convince Professor Marchbanks to do the testing, as it's for a good cause. As you know, hiring competent Defense professors is hard, or so I've been told," the Headmaster said with a twinkle in his eye.

Harry smiled. "I suppose I deserved that."

Minerva wondered what that comment meant, but she went on. "You would take all the Defense classes, have an office, and quarters. There is, of course, a salary to go along with this."

"All the classes?" he asked. She nodded. Harry thought about that. Five years of students taking three hours a week, but they were split into two houses at a time, so that meant ... thirty hours of class time. There were two NEWT years, but all the houses together as there were fewer students at the NEWT level, but they had four hours of

class per week, Hermione had told him; so that was eight more hours of class time. "I'm sorry, Professor, but I can't teach thirty-eight hours of class per week and still have time to adequately train Ginny. What if I taught only a few of the lower years and you found someone else to take most of the classes?"

"Finding a teacher quickly is hard, Mr. Potter. You have the skills, your teaching work with the DA is known to be good, and you are available. That availability is the issue. We have been unable to find anyone else on such short notice." McGonagall paused for a moment, before she asked. "Do you have any suggestions? We are open to new ideas, if you can convince us it will work."

"I assume Remus Lupin can not return?"

"No, Harry, I'm sorry. His werewolf status haunts him still," the Headmaster explained.

Harry thought about that for a minute, conjuring a pot of tea and three cups on a small table. He used a single spell since he had not bothered with all the finery. He poured and handed the cups out, and received two "Thank you's."

What he needed was fewer classes, he thought as he sipped his tea; then it hit him. "Professor, could you rearrange the timetables so I saw all the first years together, and so on, instead of teaching them two houses at a time?"

"Yes, but that would make too big a class."

"But that's the size of class I taught in the DA and it worked. The key there was I had helpers. So, what if I had three or four of the sixth or seventh year students helping me. Students who either wanted extra credit, or a little bit of spending money? They could help me with the lower years. I won't need any help on the sixth or seventh year classes as they are so much smaller. That would require only twenty-three hours teaching per week." Harry thought that sounded good.

The Headmaster looked thoughtful. "That would mean creating new timetables for everyone, but it is possible. We'll also have to get a

new classroom for you, but that's possible too. Yes, I believe that would work. Do you see any other problems, Minerva?"

"Just the obvious that we've already discussed. Mr. Potter? How do you plan to keep class discipline and teach students who are your friends?" McGonagall looked at him casually, but Harry knew that was not a casual question.

"I believe a short talk with my friends will help them understand that in the classroom, we are not friends. In there, I am the professor. As for in the class, I probably will adopt your method, Professor McGonagall." She raised an eyebrow in question, so Harry continued. "A no-nonsense yet professional attitude, coupled with a few demonstrations on the first day of class to show why they should not mess with me. Your cat transformation on my first day in your class instilled a very healthy respect for you and your abilities." Dumbledore chuckled at that.

McGonagall smiled, "Well, it does seem to work for me. I hope it will work for you too. Do you have any questions, Harry?"

"Only one. You mentioned I would have quarters. Would those be in Gryffindor Tower? Or elsewhere?" Harry asked.

"They would be in the teacher's wing. Why do you ask?" McGonagall was curious.

"Because I need them to be in Gryffindor Tower. That is where Ginny spends most of her free time, and probably some of her extra training will be there too, at least the more sedate parts like reading and discussions," Harry explained. "I will need complete control over how I train and teach her for the three subjects I'm responsible for."

"Your living with the students would not be good for teacher-student relations, Mr. Potter. Also, the dorms are for students, which you would not be," she told him.

"Would there be any problem with Ginny spending a lot of extra time in my personal quarters?" Harry asked, fully expecting this idea to get shot down.

The Deputy Headmistress gave him a slight scowl. "That would probably be worse than letting you stay in the Gryffindor Tower."

"What if I took one class, say Herbology. That would make me a student too. Could I then live in Gryffindor tower?" Harry suggested.

"I would prefer you not be in the dorm rooms for the reason Minerva explained, Harry," the Headmaster said, "but I do see your point. Minerva, the current Head Boy is not a Gryffindor."

"Oh, I see your point. Yes, we could give him the Gryffindor Head Boy room." At Harry's questioning look, McGonagall explained. "Perhaps you don't remember from when Percy Weasley was Head Boy, but each house has two extra rooms off the common room: one for the Head Boy and one for the Head Girl. They are only visible if the house has the need. I could make the Head Boy room appear. This is against my better judgment, but I will allow that, as long as you can show me it works. That is especially true considering how closely you will be working with Miss Weasley."

"I understand, Professor. Unless there is anything else, I suppose I need to go study for my NEWTs. Please let me know as soon as you can when they will take place." Harry rose to leave.

"Mr. Potter?" McGonagall called as he was about to leave the room. "Good luck and I hope you pass. I look forward to working with you."

Harry smiled. "Thank you, Professor. You've really surprised me with the offer, but I look forward to being here too. And Headmaster? Is there a scholarship fund for students who have difficulty paying for their tuition?"

"Yes, Harry. Why?"

"Please put my salary into the scholarship fund. I don't need it. Oh, and please drop Ginny from Astronomy, she will not have time for it. Good-bye." Harry left two amused professors.

"Well, Albus? What do you think?"



"I think that went very well. Your idea on drafting him was brilliant. I guess the only question is, can he pass all the tests?"

She looked thoughtful. "From what I saw today, if he knows all the subjects anywhere near as well as he knows Defense, he won't have any problems at all. Shall I help you to see Poppy?" He extended a hand and she pulled him up, then she slowly escorted him to the nurse.

When Harry keyed back to the House of Black, he was warmly and tenderly greeted by his girlfriend. Walking to the kitchen, they found everyone else starting lunch. Remus was visiting in anticipation of Harry's return.

"Harry, how did it go mate?" Ron asked. Harry had told them this morning what he was going to do today.

He could not keep the grin off of his face, "It was Potter one, and Dumbledore zero." All the students cheered. All the adults, even the Grangers, were most congratulatory. After they quieted, he also told them, "There is a downside to being so good though. I have to take five NEWTs sometime next week."

"WHAT?!" Hermione was beside herself in hearing that. "That's impossible, you're only a sixth year, and they only give NEWTs during June. Besides, why would you need to do that?"

Harry grinned at her, "Can everyone keep a secret?" He got nods all around. "Because, if I can become a fully qualified wizard before next term, I'll be an Assistant Professor for Defense Against the Dark Arts at Hogwarts."

There was total silence for several seconds until Ron said, "No way, mate. You're having on us about that, aren't you?"

"I kid you not. As it was explained to me, since I got rid of the last Defense teacher, it was fitting that I replace him." They all laughed at that.

"Wow, think how good I'll do in class since I'll be dating the teacher," Ginny said coyly.

That got some amused looks. "Actually, Ginny, you have it the easiest, as you'll receive no grade from me. Either you pass your OWLs and NEWTs, or you don't. You two," he looked at Ron and Hermione, "will have it the hardest. You have to understand that when you're in my class, you aren't my friends. I will treat you like everyone else, no favors."

"I understand, Harry. Still, that will be really good to see you teach in the classroom as you do in the DA," Hermione said with enthusiasm.

Ron was quieter, so Harry looked to him. "Ron, will you be able to handle this? I am serious about not playing favorites, I will not be like Snape."

"Yeah, no problem, Harry. Sorry, I don't mean to worry you, I was just thinking how different it will be to have you at school, but not with us in class," Ron told him before he brightened. "Hey, will you be able to play Quidditch?"

Harry smiled at his friend's obsession. "I don't know, Ron, but it doesn't seem fair to me to take someone's place and kick them off the team. I will maintain student status because I'll be taking one Herbology class, which will also let me live in Gryffindor Tower, but I didn't ask about Quidditch." Harry found it interesting that Ginny did not say anything about his answer, as he knew she would rather play Chaser than Seeker, but perhaps she felt the same way; he would ask her later.

Molly started serving lunch, and with the break in questions, Mr. Granger spoke up. "Harry, may I ask you a question."

"Sure, Mr. Granger."

"My wife and I have come to a decision, and we'd like to take you up on your offer to live here, if it still stands," the man asked.

"You are welcome to stay. What are your overall plans, Sir?" Harry was curious.

"I was talking with the man with the magical eye, Moody, and he suggested a few ways to protect ourselves that did not involve guns. There was something called a Tazer. We think that will work for us, so we'd like to live here, and continue with our work. We'll change the name of our business so our name is not in it, though if anyone was to come to the office, our names will obviously be there. We've made arrangements for our mail, and we'll give up most of our social life. It's a compromise position that allows us some safety, yet also allows us to remain in England. It will also let us stay closer to our daughter and learn more of her world." As the father said the last part, Hermione got up and went over to give them a hug. Apparently, she had not heard that part yet.

"That sounds like a workable plan, and I do hope it works out for you. Having someone live here all the time might be a good thing too," Harry told them.

Mr. Granger looked at Harry. "The only thing left is to arrange rent."

"Oh please, Mr. Granger, the house is paid for, I live somewhere else; there is no problem," Harry said.

The Muggle man smiled. "Hermione said you'd say something like that. Obviously, we'll need food, so we can provide that for everyone, but I'd like to do more. Given how much my wife likes to decorate, Hermione thought that we could convince you to let us redecorate this house. Not that I'm trying to say it's bad, but some fresh paint and new rugs and things might help everyone who comes here. It would also give us something to do, as we wouldn't be going out very much."

Harry smiled. "You're not saying anything I haven't already thought, Mr. Granger." He considered the offer for a moment. "Very well, I'll let you do that. However, please don't spend too much. Also, there are some things in this house that are magical and you will have difficulty with. So please be careful and ask for help if something isn't easily done."

"Thank you, Harry," Mrs. Granger told him.

"Speaking of help," Harry turned to his former teacher. "Moony, I need to talk to someone who's taken their NEWTs for Magical Creatures and for Potions. I need to have an idea of what I'll be facing."

"Well, I can help you with the Magical Creatures test, I made an Outstanding on that NEWT -- surprise!" the werewolf said with a grin. "I don't know about Potions though."

"Bill." Everyone turned to look at Ginny. "Bill did very well on all of his NEWTs, and I know he took Potions."

Harry smiled. "Moony, you get today and my day times, and I'll try to get Bill here tomorrow and in the evenings."

"Leave that to me," Molly said with a smile. "Oh, I'm so proud of you Harry." She came over and gave him a hug.

"You need a revision plan, Harry," Hermione said. That got a few chuckles, but Harry agreed with her. Between Hermione, Moony, and Bill, Harry had very little free time; especially when an owl came the next day telling him to be at Hogwarts at eight in the morning on Wednesday, Jan 1st.  
(Fri 3 Jan 1997)

There was no practical portion to the NEWT in Care for Magical Creatures, so as Harry turned in that test; he was done. It had been a grueling three days, with two NEWTs on each of Wednesday and Thursday, and one today. Normally, students had one NEWT a day and only rarely two days in a row.

"Congratulations Mr. Potter, on surviving this schedule," Professor Marchbanks told him. She was glancing over the test.

"Can you please give me an idea on how I did?"

The little old witch continued to examine the test, after a minute she looked up at him. "It's not official, but I'd say you'll probably get an Exceeds Expectations on this one."

Harry was happy about that, as it was the one he was most concerned about. "Do you know about the others?" he asked hopefully.

She smiled at him. "I can tell you that you already have three Outstandings and one Exceeds Expectations. I suspect you can guess what grades go with which subjects."

Harry was thrilled and wanted to dance.

"If you'll go have lunch and return at four this afternoon, I'll have some official papers for you, Mr. Potter. Also, I appreciate you taking this seriously so it wasn't a waste of time," she told him.

"Thank you, Professor Marchbanks! I'll be back." Harry turned to leave and go spend some time with his understanding but neglected girlfriend. He hoped two hours with only them locked in the library might make it up to her.

"Oh, Mr. Potter? Congratulations on your new job. Welcome to the job of educator; I'm sure you'll do a much better job than the man you're replacing." Griselda Marchbanks watched the young man leave with a spring in his step. She thought he would make fine addition to the staff here, though younger than she thought teachers should be. Still, he at least knew what he was doing and he was a nice young man; she had never liked Severus Snape.

## Chapter 12: Hello Hogwarts

(Sun 5 Jan)

Ginny thought she looked ridiculous as a blonde, but she was one for now, as was Harry. With a small bag slung over each of their shoulders, like a number of other students, they walked through the crowd on Platform 9  $\frac{3}{4}$  towards the Hogwarts Express. Between their hair change and hats, they made it to the train without being stopped by a single reporter looking for Harry. Of course, the large number of Aurors present might have distracted the reporters slightly.

On the train, they cancelled their glamours, and searched for a compartment. To their good fortune, they found Neville alone in one.

Neville was very surprised to see Harry. "Harry? What are you doing here?"

"Going to school, just like you," Harry said with an easy grin. "So, mate, how are you doing? I'm sorry for what happened to you."

"Thanks, Harry, but it wasn't your fault. Besides, Gran killed two of them before they got her. It hurts to lose her, but I'll make it."

Harry could see the sadness despite the brave front his friend put up. "Neville, in a way it was my fault. They were going after my friends, so I'm really sorry I put you in danger like that." Harry had a hard time meeting Neville's eyes, but he forced himself to.

The look on Neville's face did not change. "Harry, you're still my friend and I'm not sorry about that. I know we're at war. I hope you still consider me your friend."

That endeared him to Harry all the more. "Of course I do," Harry assured him.

"Then be a friend and teach the DA again." Neville now looked at Ginny. "No offense Ginny, you did a good job, but it wasn't the same." After she smiled in understanding, he looked back at Harry. "I've got

a couple of Death Eaters to go after. Bellatrix and her husband have come after the Longbottoms one time too many."

"You'll get your first wish Neville," Harry told him. "I'll be teaching the DA again, and I have lots of things planned."

"Thanks, Harry," Neville told him as the door to the compartment opened. In stepped Ron and Hermione.

They all talked, trying to avoid the subject of the attacks until eleven o'clock came and the train started moving. Hermione stood and looked at Ron and Ginny. "It's time for us to go." Harry had been holding Ginny's hand, and he squeezed it slightly as he did not want to let go.

"Harry," his girlfriend looked at him. "I have to go to the prefect meeting. Nothing will happen here. Hey, it's even better since Malfoy is gone. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Harry took a deep breath. He had known this was coming, but it had not made being separated from her any easier. He still felt overly protective of her. Perhaps, this was a good first step towards being more reasonable. "OK," he told her as he let go of her hand. "I'll wait here with Neville." When Ginny turned her back, Harry soundlessly put a Tracking charm on her. As long as it wasn't discovered and removed, he could find her almost anywhere in England now, should she be taken off the train. As he put his wand back up, he wished he could do that charm wandlessly. While he could do most easy spells and a shield spell wandlessly, he was unable to do the tracking charm without his wand, so far. He vowed to himself to learn that soon.

After the three left, Harry and Neville talked some more about the holidays. When Neville said he was surprised that Luna had not shown up, Harry had to tell him about her family being attacked. Neville did not take it as hard as Harry had thought he would, but it clearly saddened his friend. When Harry explained about the Grangers and the Weasleys being attacked too, and how the Death Eaters had tried to kidnap Ginny, Neville finally understood the bigger picture. That seemed to give the boy more resolve to fight.

Neville also commented on Harry holding Ginny's hand. Harry explained his secret of being James York and asked Neville to keep that to himself. The story they were going to give was that James had had to move away, Ginny had met up with Harry over the holidays, and they had just started going out together. Harry kept his new job to himself for now.

An hour later, the three prefects finally returned, and Harry noticed Ginny was less than happy. "Ginny, anything wrong?"

"No Harry, nothing to worry about."

"Fine, I won't worry, but what happened?"

Her look told him to drop it, but when he kept looking at her, she finally said, "Someone asked me a rude question, and I put him in his place. Please don't worry about it, it's taken care of." She could not believe Colin was still trying to ask her out. She had barely avoided hexing him out of frustration for his persistence. Now that Harry was here and she would be seen with him, she hoped that would finally put a stop to Colin's obsessive behavior.

As Harry would have said something anyway, he was prevented by the door opening. There stood several DA members to say hi. For the majority of the rest of the trip, the rest of the DA stopped by to say hello to Harry. He found it slightly frustrating as he wanted to spend time talking to Ginny, but Ron seemed to find it humorous. Ginny found it annoying, but for a different reason. She noticed that most of the girls seemed to be looking at Harry differently, and not a good differently to her.

When Harry walked into the Great Hall for the Welcoming Feast, it was like coming home. He had not realized how much he had missed school. He was enjoying the food and talking to all of his friends at the Gryffindor table, until the Headmaster stood up to give his start of term announcements.

"Welcome back everyone," the Headmaster started. "It is good to be together again. The normal rules still apply, the Forbidden Forest is



still forbidden, and magic should not be used in the hallways. Mr. Filch has a list of banded items, which has increased slightly with some new Christmas additions from Weasleys Wizarding Wheezes."

He stopped to take a sip of his drink before continuing. "As you might have heard during the holidays, Professor Snape is no longer with us." Some faces brightened as a few had not yet heard about the Defense teacher's demise. "While that position has historically been difficult to fill, I believe we have a fine replacement for the rest of the year." Those two statements caused some murmurs.

"Mr. Potter, will you please stand up?" the Headmaster called out, and Harry slowly stood to applause. "Yes, yes, welcome back Mr. Potter. While Mr. Potter will be taking one class this term, the majority of his time will be spent as an Assistant Professor, specifically as the professor for Defense Against the Dark Arts." Except for the Slytherins, everyone applauded loudly, which embarrassed Harry.

When the applause died down, Harry sat, and the Headmaster continued his announcement. "When Mr. Potter is in his Herbology class, or in Gryffindor Tower, you may consider him another student such as yourselves. In all other places, and especially in his class, you should treat him as you would any other professor. You should know that he made an Outstanding on his Defense NEWT, and has the highest score ever seen on that test. I look forward to seeing what he will do here this term."

Harry saw a number of people whispering, and even heard one person down the Gryffindor table ask, "He's already taken his NEWTs?"

"Finally, due to some unusual circumstances, your timetables have had to change for this term. So please be at breakfast tomorrow morning to receive your new one." More murmurs arose with that announcement. "That is all; have a pleasant evening," the Headmaster dismissed them.

Harry got many congratulations on his way out of the Great Hall and up to the Tower. His fellow Gryffindors were especially proud of his

new position. From the comments he received, he had to explain, several times, that he would treat everyone the same in his class.

Once in the Tower, he found a new door that he had not remembered from last year, but was vaguely familiar from the year Percy was Head Boy. He went in to explore; his three closest friends came with him. It was a small room with a bed, a desk, a wardrobe, a nightstand, and a little free space in the middle of the room. Perhaps the nicest feature of the room was the private bathroom. He would not have to fight anyone for that in the morning. He also found that only he could open the door to his room. That was interesting, and he immediately wondered how that could be changed.

Ron and Hermione left, though Ginny stayed behind for a few minutes. After a very lingering good-night kiss, she too went up to her dorm room. Pulling his shrunken trunk out of his pocket, he moved in. Once that was done, he had one more task for the night.

With his Manor key in hand, he Portkeyed to the Manor, then one more time to his Gringotts vault. There, he shrunk the Potter pedestal and put it in his pocket. With a couple seconds of concentration, he transformed to his phoenix form and flashed to his new dorm room, where he transformed back to a human and enlarged the pedestal. Pulling out his Manor key, he used it twice. The second time, he arrived in front of the pedestal in his dorm room and not in his Gringotts vault. Happy with the results of his experiment and the freedom that would give him, he set the Christmas present from Ginny, the two photos of her, on top of the pedestal where he could readily see them. Thinking of her, he finally went to bed for the night.  
(Mon 6 Jan)

Harry had just finished combing his hair, when he heard a knock on the door. Walking over to it, he noticed that he had no way to know who was on the outside. What he needed was Muggle peephole -- another thing for his mental to-do list. Opening the door, he saw Ginny standing there.

"Ready for breakfast Harry? Ooh, nice look with the hair. I haven't seen you with it draped around you before." She walked up to him

and gave him a good morning kiss and ran her fingers through his hair. She was starting to think she enjoyed doing that to him almost as much as he enjoyed running his fingers through her hair.

"Yeah, just a sec." He walked back to the bathroom and put a loose band around his hair so he now had a short ponytail. "OK, he told her. Grabbing her hand, he walked her to breakfast.

They got several stares on the way, which caused them to smile. "I guess our story hasn't made the rounds yet?" he asked softly while they walked.

"I suppose not, though it hasn't been for the lack of me trying. I made sure my roommates and several other girls who are solidly plugged into the gossip network, knew about James moving and us getting together over the holidays. I'm sure the whole school will know by lunch," she told him with conviction.

They had barely started breakfast when Professor McGonagall came to hand out the new timetables. Ginny saw that all her afternoons were free, and her mornings had a number of empty time slots as she was only signed up for: Ancient Runes, Care of Magical Creatures, Herbology, and Potions. Harry got his schedule, which she saw as solidly packed in the morning, as was Thursday afternoon. He also had a hour marked on Tuesday afternoons too.

"Not as much time for us as I'd hoped, but I guess we'll have to make do," Harry muttered.

"Why? What did you have planned?" she asked.

He grinned at her. "Meet me in the common room at lunchtime and I'll explain."

"Not here?"

"Nope." He leaned over to whisper very softly in her ear. "You'll eat only some lunches and very few dinners here this term." When she looked at him in puzzlement, he added, "You know how we rogues are, we have to be different."

He was saved from more questions by the Headmaster clinking his goblet. "May I have your attention please? In addition to your timetable changes, please note that the classroom for your Defense Against the Dark Arts class has changed as well. If you continue down the same corridor, three doors later on the left, you will find a sign marking the new classroom."

That was Harry's cue. "I really hate to leave you Ginny, but I guess this is good practice for me in letting go. I need to set up my classroom before everyone gets there. Be careful for me. Please?"

"You know I will Harry." Ginny leaned over and gave him a short kiss, which he returned.

As Harry got up to leave, he noticed Colin Creevey eyeing him. He smiled at the fifth year and continued on, thinking about his first class.

Ginny noticed she was not the only girl watching Harry walk away. She hoped a lot of that would diminish by the end of the day.

In his classroom, he found it was almost three times the size of the one he had always been in. Everything from the old classroom had been moved in here. Taking a quick glance around, he decided to leave all the pictures up. All the devices were shrunk down and stored in a cabinet.

The desks were the hard part. With the help of his wand, they were soon flying around and arranging themselves in semi-circle rows, three deep, around the back of the room. Finally, he placed a specialized Protean Charm on the desks and a box on his desk. It had taken him nearly a full day at Grimmauld Place, along with Hermione's help, to come up with the specialized charm. Finding the class roster for this first class, he set it on the special box on his desk and tapped his wand on it to add a little magical energy, and a little sign on each of the desks lit with a student's name.

Noticing it was five before nine, he unlocked the classroom door and stood in the middle of the room. Fourth year students started coming in. "Each desk is marked with a name, please find yours and sit

there." He repeated that a few more times over the next several minutes.

At nine o'clock, Professor Dumbledore and three older students came in. The Headmaster closed the door behind him. "I have some paperwork to do, please carry on and don't mind me," he told Harry as he walked to a small desk in a front corner of the room. Harry held out his hand toward a few chairs on the side as he looked at Katie Bell, Ernie Macmillan, and Hermione Granger. They seated themselves.

Harry turned to his class. He was more nervous than he had expected. "Good morning everyone. Since you are all fourth years, I'm sure you know who I am, or was. Today I am Professor Potter, and this is Defense Against the Dark Arts." That sounded stupid to Harry, but he figured he needed to start somewhere.

"As you've noticed, all the fourth years are in this class now. That is to help me with time; it is also to help you with meeting new people. You will get to know people from all the houses this way. You have assigned seats, please take them when you come in. That helps me know who you are, and to take attendance quickly, since the class is so big." He saw a girl writing something.

"Also because of the size of the class, I have some help: Miss Bell, Miss Granger, and Mr. Macmillan. You will treat them with the same respect and courtesy you do me. Now, this is a very important class to you, there are several reasons why." The girl was folding her note, Harry saw from the corner of his eye. "Miss Granger, would you please explain why this class is so important."

Hermione was a bit startled at being called on. She had been looking at Harry and thinking about how he looked and carried himself, not to mention remembering his arms around her when he had rescued her family. She knew enough physiology to know that Quidditch was helpful, but the sport alone was not good enough to give someone the kind of physique Harry had. That had caused her to wonder if she could get Harry to talk Ron into doing whatever Harry was doing for exercise.

The sixth year girl stood and easily started talking. Harry disillusioned himself, which caused a few gasps and Hermione to momentarily pause before she continued. In addition to a demonstration, Harry had another goal. Walking very slowly and quietly, he approached the girl who had been writing a note. When she put her hand out behind her to pass it backward, Harry carefully reached out and took it from her. She did not know her friend did not have it, though her friend saw it float for a second and then disappear.

As Hermione finished telling about being able to defend yourself, Harry became visible as he stood in front of the offending fourth year girl. She was very surprised. Her surprise turned into horror when she realized Harry was opening her note. "Shall we share this with the rest of the class, Miss Vane?" Harry did not wait for an answer to his slightly sarcastic question.

"Miss Vane writes," Harry was having difficulty controlling his embarrassment, but a little anger helped him. "He's so hot isn't he? I wonder what else he could teach us?" Harry Vanished the note and walked back to the center of the room. He noted that Dumbledore glanced at him with a twinkle in his eye, though the old man made no other indication that he was paying attention to the class before he returned to his paperwork.

"Charms is a very useful class, as is Transfiguration. Herbology is helpful, and what you learn in Magical Creatures could save you from serious injury should you run into one of the more dangerous animals. I could keep going on like that about almost every class offered here at Hogwarts; but Defense is not like that. Defense is about life and death!" he said with some anger. "In case you haven't been reading the Daily Prophet, nearly ten people died over the holidays due to attacks by Death Eaters coming to their homes. That affected two students that I know personally, and that doesn't count three other students I know who were attacked in their homes, though fortunately, no one died in those attacks." The class was totally silent.

"Now, given the seriousness of what you face, why are we passing notes discussing the teacher?" He looked at Romilda Vane, who had the grace to look ashamedly at her desk. "That will be ten points from Gryffindor. Would anyone else like to pass a note and lose ten points

for your house?" He had no takers. "Very well. The first class or two will be review while I determine what you learned last term, then we will move forward. This class will be very practical, and most homework will be optional." He got a number of smiles at that. "However, skip your homework at your own peril, because you will be expected to know the material before you come to class." That got a few groans.

"Everyone get a partner and spread out around the room. I want to see one of you doing an Expelliarmus, while the other practices a Protego shield. We'll switch the attack and defense when I call for it, then move on to other spells. Go!" Harry called.

He walked over to his helpers. "This will be just like the DA. Help make corrections and enforce discipline if you find them playing. We'll talk more about what you'll be doing later."

Harry started walking around. It was sort of like a big DA meeting. So far, so good, he thought. Looking up towards the Headmaster, he saw the old man look up at him and wink. With a smile, Harry continued walking around his practicing students making corrections to problems he saw in casting.

By noon, Harry was famished. In addition to the fourth years, he had also had the sixth years for the rest of the morning. Fortunately, Ron behaved himself, for which Harry was extremely grateful for not having to make an example out of his friend. When class ended, they waited for him.

"I'm starved," Ron told him as he cleaned up his desk.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "How do you like teaching so far, Harry?"

"It's all right. I do appreciate the sixth years not forcing me to make an example out of someone."

"Why? Did something happen in your other class?" Ron asked.

"I'll let Hermione tell you as she was there. I've got to run. Don't expect to find Ginny and me until late this evening," Harry forewarned them.

"Huh? Why not?" Ron looked at him a little suspiciously.

"Because we're starting her training, and it's going to take almost all of her free time," Harry explained as they started walking out the door.

"But we'll still see you at dinner, right?" Hermione asked.

"Nope, I have other arrangements for that. Look, if I had it my way, we'd be training from eight in the morning to six in the evening, five days a week. We won't have that, so we have to do the best we can. Gotta run; see you guys later," Harry called over his shoulder as he went in the direction of the Tower and not the Great Hall.

"He sure is serious about all that," Ron commented.

"I think what happened on Christmas Eve really affected him," Hermione guessed as they walked to lunch. The girl knew it had affected her.

In the common room, Harry found Ginny waiting for him. He smiled at her. "Go up to your room and get a change of clothes like you'd wear around school, and several changes of shorts and exercise type clothes. As soon as you have those, come on back down and we'll go."

"Huh?"

"The faster you go, the sooner we get lunch," he told her playfully. She rolled her eyes at him, but did hurry up the stairs. When she came back down, the door to his room was open, so she went inside.

"Close the door behind you, and let's see what you have to exercise in."

"Harry!"



"Hey, I'm going to see them on you anyway." Other than the T-shirts, he did not like what he saw. "Bring this along, but we need to get you properly outfitted. Grab on." She clutched his arm and he Portkeyed them to the Manor, and walked her to the eating area by the kitchen.

"Master Harry, Mistress Ginny, lunch is ready as you requested," Winky told him.

"Thank you, Winky. Be sure you and Dobby have some too." Harry pointed Ginny to a chair so they could have their salad and spaghetti. "Now, here are my thoughts. As you can see on your timetable, we have afternoons for training. I plan to take most of your evenings until eight or nine too."

Ginny was surprised. "But what about homework and other things?"

"Use the free time you have in the mornings for that. I will leave you some time in the evenings occasionally, but to me, this training takes precedence over everything else. Oh, and most of Saturday is for this, as is one hour every morning before breakfast. That's why you have the extra clothes. Feel free to bring as many of your clothes here as you want; I'll buy you more if you need them. We'll eat some lunches at the castle so people won't talk about us too much, but most dinners will be here so we can maximize our time in training and lessons."

"You're being very serious about all of this Harry," Ginny told him as evenly as she could. Part of her liked the thought of being as good as she had seen him at Christmas, but part of her could not believe at how much work that was going to entail.

"Yes, I'm extremely serious. I'm really sorry this is going to put a damper on your free time and social life. Please understand that nothing is more important to me right now than your safety. In many ways, you are my greatest weakness. I don't think there's anything I wouldn't do to get you back if you were taken from me, so I can't let that happen. As I can't be everywhere with you, I have to accept the fact that you will have to be able to take care of yourself." Harry started to sound more emotional. "But Ginny, know this: I finally figured out that I may know that, but I don't know that I will always

feel that truth. So if I get too protective and possessive, you're going to have to tell me, and help me."

She smiled and reached out and held his hand. "I'll do my best for you Harry. And don't worry, I'd do almost anything for you."

Harry noticed that she had said "almost", but he let it slide for now. "Let's finish lunch quickly, then we have an errand to run."

"Oh? Where?"

"To get you some work out clothes," he said with a smile. She wondered what he meant as they quickly finished lunch.

Harry transformed to a phoenix, had her grab his tailfeathers, and he flashed them to an alley in Muggle London. He took her in a nearby store and explained to the saleswoman that Ginny was about to start an exercise class and had nothing appropriate to wear. When he explained that except for trainers, she needed six of everything, the sales woman smiled and led Ginny away. As they were about to leave, Harry found out Ginny also had not brought any of her swimsuits, so he had her get a couple while he waited. Ginny had a broad smile and seemed like she was having a good time when they were checking out with a large pile of clothing. Harry paid very little attention to what she had picked up once he saw one of the outfits, he just handed over his Muggle credit card.

Finding a discreet place, they Portkeyed back to the Manor. Taking her up to the second floor, Harry spread his hands towards the bedroom doors. "Pick any one you want. You can store your extra clothes in there, as well as change and shower as necessary. They each have a private bathroom. Winky will take care of the laundry as necessary." Surprisingly to Harry, she picked the bedroom closest to his.

After changing, Harry led her to the exercise room. He liked her in her shorts and elastic looking exercise top that showed plenty of stomach. "This is where we'll come in the mornings. You can come to my room at six and I'll take us both here for a workout. We can shower and change here before going back for breakfast. That will leave our

afternoons and evenings free for dueling and lessons. Moony will be joining us here most afternoons."

Nearly a grueling hour later, after finding muscles Ginny did not know she had, they went to the Dueling Room. There, he introduced her to the practice dummies. She thought it was fun until he called a halt and pointed out all the colored spots on her, as well as explained what each spell was that would have hit her. The fact that the dummy was only set to medium bothered her. When Harry demonstrated fighting two dummies at once, that were both set on the hard setting, she felt even worse, especially when he finished and did not have a single colored spot on him at all.

"Don't feel bad Ginny. It's taken me many months to get to this point, but this is where I want you to be by the end of this term."

She gulped, but vowed to herself that she would do it. She wanted him to be proud of her, and to think that she could defend herself too.

After a shower and change of clothes, Ginny was surprised with the first lesson he had for her: Apparating. "You need to be able to escape when things go bad. Slytherins are correct that there are times to run away so you can fight another day," he explained. She found it amusing that he would take advice from the Slytherins, but she did understand what he meant.

Before she knew it, dinnertime had come and they were eating dinner with Dobby and Winky. The elves said very little, but she could tell they enjoyed this, and that Harry regularly had them eat with him. That said something about Harry to her.

When dinner was finished, they went to his marvelous library. There Harry started talking about Defense. It took awhile, but she finally realized that he was actually quizzing her to find out how much she knew. By the end of the evening, they were discussing the battles he had fought over the holidays and why he had done what he had. It surprised her how much she was learning with simple discussion. Unfortunately, he also told her to read a few chapters in her fifth year text book.

At half past nine, Harry stopped the lessons. "We've gone a little longer than I plan to normally, but it was the first day and we had that errand at the beginning." After a smile, he transformed into his phoenix again and flashed them to the empty Defense classroom. "It's nice to have a place to come to like this, isn't it?" He asked her as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

As their lips broke apart, he trailed kisses down her throat and Ginny wanted to melt. She managed to softly get out, "What lesson is this, Harry?"

Going back up her neck to nibble on her ear, he whispered, "This is about how a rogue feels about his woman -- the one that belongs only to him." Harry wanted to tell her more, but wasn't sure how; this would have to do for now.

When they left the classroom to go back to the tower a little before curfew, she asked him, "Why didn't we just go back to your room?"

"Because I don't want people thinking we've been in there all night. No one will have seen us go in there, so if we come out now, they're bound to think we've been in there for hours. I'd prefer them to think we've been somewhere else. We can rightfully say we were studying, we just found a nice private place," he explained. That made so much sense, she could not believe she had not thought of it.

Arriving back in the Tower, they heard Ron ask with a slightly angry voice, "Where have you been all night?" He did not miss the fact that the hair on both of them was not neat.

"Like I told you after class, Ron, we've been training -- mostly." He couldn't help tweaking his best friend slightly. "I do think the last few minutes of the evening were a bit more private. What do you think Ginny?"

Ginny realized what he was doing and went along. She wrapped an arm around Harry's waist and pressed herself against his side and kissed his cheek. "Mostly correct."

Harry noticed that Lavender and Parvati were closely watching, too.

"That is my sister there," Ron announced with some heat.

"A sister who can make up her own mind, and who you've been told to leave alone," the sister said. "Remember what Dad said about me not hurting you too much Ron?" That cooled her brother down. "I need to get my books for some other homework. I'll be right back."

When Ginny went upstairs, Harry went over to Neville, who had also been watching the scene, though with amusement. "Hey, Neville. Can you tutor me in Herbology? I need to make sure I understand what you all covered during the first term."

"Sure, Harry. Can you give me a little extra Defense training? I want to be ready when the time comes."

"Deal!" Harry told him. Yes, he liked the friend Neville was turning into. They just needed to spend more time together.  
(Fri 17 Jan)

Though the Headmaster had not been in Harry's classroom all day, he came as Harry's last class of the day was finishing up. "Professor Potter, I was wondering if you would have lunch with me in my office. I'd like to know how your classes and other things are going."

Harry was uncertain how to tell him no, so he said, "I was about to meet Ginny for lunch before we started her training for the day."

The Headmaster suggested, "Why don't you let her have lunch with her classmates? I've noticed she hasn't done that often lately."

As Harry was trying to figure out how to say no, Ginny came into his classroom.

Dumbledore looked at her. "Ah, Miss Weasley, we were just discussing you. Would you so kind as to have lunch with your other friends today so Harry and I can have lunch to discuss a few items of business?"

"Uh, certainly Headmaster." What else could she say?

"Meet me at one, Ginny. I'll be done by then," Harry told her. She nodded and left. Harry was not happy to have his actions forced like this; Ginny's training was the most important thing he was doing.

Harry locked his classroom door as they left. The hallways were mostly empty, as the students had made their way to the Great Hall for lunch. There was only the occasional straggler, so Dumbledore started talking.

"Harry, during our last discussion right after Christmas, we discussed communicating with each other using the mirrors. In the place of that, I'd like us to get together a couple of times a month to discuss matters like how your classes are going, how Ginny's training is going, information I may find that will help you with your goals, and whatever else we might find to talk about."

Walking in silence for few seconds, Harry looked over at the Headmaster and asked, "Do we really need to do this now?" Maybe the Headmaster was unlucky today, but Harry was not in a good mood.

Coming to his office, the Headmaster said, "Licorice Wands." They went into the office where two lunch trays of soup and sandwiches were waiting.

As they sat down, Dumbledore finally answered the question. "I do try to set aside some time for each member on the staff, and this is the time I set aside for you. I was hoping this would not be overly inconvenient since you need to eat lunch anyway and can't really train at the same time."

Swallowing his food, Harry replied, "While that is true, we normally do not take this long for lunch. The goal of the training is to make Ginny as good a fighter as possible so she will be safe."

The Headmaster thought about that. "I would think she is already quite safe here at the castle, as she is at the top of her class in

Defense Against the Dark Arts. The only real problem comes from when you both go to Hogsmeade and might run into a Death Eater."

"It's about overall safety, here and outside the gates. I would guess that half of the students and a number of the teachers here probably could not stand up to a Death Eater. As we will almost certainly have Death Eaters after us, this training is very important."

"I do see your point, Harry; therefore, I shall try to keep this as brief as possible."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said evenly trying to get to the point of why he was here.

Dumbledore patted his mouth with his napkin before he launched into his main point. "Harry, over the last few months, I've developed a theory on how Tom Riddle stayed alive after the Killing Curse that bounced off of you and hit him. I'm not quite ready to explain it all yet, as I need more data, but I thought you should know I am trying to help you with your final task. Also, at this time, I would encourage you not to fight him if the chance arises," Harry was shocked at hearing that, "because if my theory is correct, you can not win at this time. I hope to prove my theory one way or the other very soon, and then I can advise you better how to defeat him."

"Very well. That should not be too hard to do, as I don't expect to run into him unless he comes here to the school," Harry agreed.

"How do feel about being a professor Harry? Do you like teaching?"

"Mostly. Grading homework and tests is a real pain, but the classroom part is fairly enjoyable. It's much like running the DA," Harry told him.

The Headmaster smiled. "I understand, Harry. By the way, I must say that your handling of Miss Vane passing a note was most enjoyable to watch. I think you communicated your message quite thoroughly." He chuckled at the memory before continuing on. "Is there anything I or anyone else can do to help you as a teacher?"

"Other than finding someone to take over some of the classes, maybe another Assistant Professor, then no, I'm fine."

"An interesting thought, I'll look into that for you. Maybe someone to take the first two or three years?"

"Yes, that would be very helpful," Harry agreed with fervor.

"I'm not hopeful, but I will try to see if I can find someone. Lastly," Dumbledore said as he pushed his empty tray back, "the question of arranging some sort of testing for Miss Weasley has come up. Because your training is so unorthodox, the idea is to make sure she is making good progress, as well as to offer suggestions on things she might have missed."

Harry closed his eyes and worked hard at not snapping at the old man. "I really don't see that as necessary, especially considering how time constrained we already are."

The Headmaster sighed. "I'm afraid I really must insist. While you and I may see it as a waste of time, there are those who see you as wasting Miss Weasley's time. Those people must be satisfied."

Not being able to totally keep the snideness out of his voice, Harry asked, "And who would these people be?"

"They would be some of the other professors. They are not against what you are doing Harry, but they feel they must protect Miss Weasley. How about we set aside an hour or two on Friday in two weeks?" Dumbledore suggested and waited for an answer.

Harry could tell he was not going to get out of this. "Fine. We've been concentrating on Defense, so that's the only subject you'll be able to test her on. If someone is going to waste our time, I think it's only fair to waste their time; therefore, I request that whoever wants this to be present to test her themselves."

The Headmaster smiled, "As you wish, I'll set it up for two weeks from now. We can talk during lunch that day too."



"Sure, whatever," Harry was about to lose his patience. Noticing the time, he was happy for an excuse to leave. "I'm afraid my time is up and my next class is about to begin. Good-bye Headmaster." Harry rose to leave.

"Until next time, Harry," Dumbledore agreed. Albus had thought he was making progress with Harry, but this last item had probably destroyed whatever good faith he had extended. He had to agree with Harry on the testing, it was waste of time. He could tell Harry took this far too seriously to use the time only to work on an amorous relationship. Still, the accusation had been made and must be settled. Perhaps Harry's way would fix the problem.

When Ginny saw Harry come into the Gryffindor common room, she thought he looked ready to rip someone apart. As no one else was in the common room, he walked up to her and tersely said, "Grab on, let's go."

"What's wrong, Harry?"

"Not now, I need some time first." He looked at her and waited. She grabbed on and they Portkeyed to the Manor. When they got there, he strode into the house as quickly as he could and walked directly to the Dueling Room. She started to follow him, but Remus stopped her.

"What's wrong with him?" the werewolf asked.

"Don't know exactly. I know he had lunch with Dumbledore, but when he returned, he was like this. I think we need to keep an eye on him so he doesn't hurt himself, at least not too badly." Ginny was concerned for her boyfriend.

Lupin nodded and they went in the direction he had left in. Peeking in the Dueling Room, they saw Harry activating a fifth dummy. Stepping back, he yelled, "Begin!" Four minutes later, all five dummies were in pieces. Harry did not seem to care about the three green dots on him.

"Feel better, Harry?" Moony asked him.

"Much! But Moony, do you think we could put faces on these things? That might help more sometimes," Harry said with a small hint of his smile returning.

"Perhaps, but it might depend on whose you want on there. I don't think I'd care to see mine on one," Lupin quipped.

"Good point, I'm not sure whose I want on there right now anyway, though I'd probably settle for Dumbledore's at the moment," Harry told them.

"Why don't you tell us about it, Harry?"

Harry conjured three comfortable chairs and they discussed Harry's meeting. When he was done, Harry looked at Ginny. "So help me, I'm going to make it so whoever said this has to face you themselves, and I'm going to help you make them regret they ever thought about this."

The intensity on Harry's face scared her, yet, it also excited her to hear him say he thought she could fight better than a professor. She did not realize she could already fight better than all but about five of the teachers right now.

## Chapter 13: Tests

(Fri 31 Jan)

Ginny knocked on Harry's door at a little before six. Though she had not liked getting up this early four weeks ago, she was now used to it, and if forced to be honest, would say that she liked it. Or more accurately, that she liked the results. She smiled to herself as she thought of Harry's comment yesterday on how she looked in her exercise clothes; apparently he liked the results, too.

Harry walked to his door. He knew who it would be, but he looked out the little peephole to make sure. All it had taken was a trip to a Muggle hardware store and a Drilling spell to install it one night when no one was in the common room to hear him. His latest modification to the door had been completed last night with a little help from Moony, whom he had Portkeyed in.

"Morning, Ginny," he told her when he opened his door. "Hey, before you come in, I want you to try to open the door yourself."

"You know that doesn't work," she reminded him.

"Humor me and try again." He shut the door.

Shrugging, she grabbed the doorknob, turned it, and pushed. To her surprise, the door opened. "How did that happen?" she asked, amazed.

Harry pulled her in and shut the door. "It took me a long time, but I finally figured out the wards that control the door. Once I understood, I just added your name to the access list. So you're now there along with me, McGonagall, and Dumbledore. Don't let anyone see you do that if you can help it, but in the morning like this, or if there is an emergency, then you can get in if you need to."

"That's brilliant work, Harry!"

"Thanks!" He gave her a big smile. "Oh, if you want to store your dragon hide coat down here, so if you need it fast, you can hang it here next to mine. It would save you a trip up the stairs."

"Yeah, good thinking. Well, shall we go?" Ginny had stopped just grabbing onto his arm and instead put her arms around his neck instead. She thought it was a lot more fun this way, especially since she always got a kiss out of it.

Harry did not answer. Instead, he pulled her lithe body to him and into a tight hug, where he gave her her expected traveling kiss. He grinned at her little traveling ritual as he touched his wand to the Manor Portkey.

Harry went to the Headmaster's office for lunch, as he was expected. When lunch was done, Harry was not in as bad a mood as last time, but he felt it had been a waste of time. The only thing useful at all was that he found there were only two doubters and they would both be there.

At one o'clock, Ginny showed up and the three of them walked to the Room of Requirement. There, they found Professors McGonagall, Sprout, and Trelawney. Harry was very surprised.

Dumbledore paced to open the room while Harry looked at McGonagall. At his questioning expression, she very slightly shook her head and gave him a smile. "I'm only here to observe, Mr. Potter."

After they had all entered the room, which again had light blue walls, Harry turned to the Divination teacher. "Professor Trelawney? Why do you believe we need to do this test?"

"Because my dear boy, I have foreseen her death and it is because she has done nothing to prepare. You need to be convinced too; this test will show you that." She continued to stare at Harry through her large glasses without blinking.

Harry just shook his head and turn to the Herbology teacher, whom he normally had respect for. Now he was wondering if it was

misplaced. "Professor Sprout? Why do you believe we need to do this test?"

"In one sense, I really doubt we do, because I think you are quite sincere about your desire to train Miss Weasley. However, as Professor Dumbledore described your training and how different it was from what we normally do, I felt this was a good safety measure to make sure she is still learning all she needs to, and won't be embarrassed when she takes her OWLs."

"I see." Harry actually did understand that reasoning. He also considered that much of the objection was probably because he was so young and his methods were so far from the norm. "And even with my telling you we normally train at least seven hours a day, at least five and usually six days a week, you still feel we need to do this?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Potter, but I do." Sprout really did look apologetic.

That did not deter him from what he was about to do, or rather what he was about to have Ginny do. "Very well, let's prove this is a waste of time so we can all get on with our day. Professors Sprout and Trelawney? If you both will please stand over there on that side of the room and draw your wands, we will begin the test."

Professor Sprout looked surprised. "What do you mean by that?"

"It's quite simple. Since you are the ones who doubt my teaching method and my student's ability to learn, it seems quite fitting for you to test her yourself. That way you will know exactly how good or bad she is. Go ahead and get ready, I'll take Ginny to the other side of the room. If you wish to confer to form a strategy together, feel free to do so," Harry told them. Harry also noted that Dumbledore did not countermand his request as he arranged the test; in fact, both the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall stood there and said nothing.

Ginny had kept a very neutral expression on her face the entire time, but when they turned around to walk to the other side of the room, she grinned like she'd just been handed the key to Honeydukes. "You sure I should do this Harry?" she whispered.

Harry whispered back. "They are questioning both your honor and mine. While I would prefer to be the one to do this, I'm going to have to ask you to do the dirty work. Are you OK with that?"

Her grin became more mischievous. "No problem, Harry."

"Good. Now, your strongest Expelliarmus for Trelawney should be enough, but for Sprout, have as much fun as you want as long as you don't get hurt. If she even comes close, just end it. You won't have any problem with this. Make us both proud and you can have some extra free time later." He winked at her and her grin now filled her face at that thought. Ginny schooled her expression back to the neutral one and turned to face her opponents.

As Harry walked back to the middle with the Headmaster and Professor McGonagall, he noticed that Sprout looked very nervous, while Trelawney had not even drawn her wand. "Professor Trelawney? It is customary to draw your wand when in a duel."

She smiled and pulled hers out from inside her robes, though it was very casually held.

Harry wondered how the Divination teacher had ever passed enough NEWTs to become a fully qualified witch. "Ready?" He looked and no one said anything. "Begin!"

Ginny wasted no time and a single Expelliarmus sent Trelawney flying backward nearly four feet to land on her arse, as her wand was sailing through the air. Before the wand got to Ginny, she was already firing a Tripping Hex at Sprout. Sprout barely got a shield up in time. Ginny caught the wand that was coming to her and started firing Bludgeoning hexes at Sprout. Sprout had to start dancing as the first hex took out her shield and she seemed to be incapable of putting up another while on the move. The next hex hit her right shoulder, which controlled her wand arm. Sprout's wand went flying as she twisted and the woman fell screaming from a dislocated shoulder.

"Hold!" Dumbledore yelled and hurried over to Sprout, who was rolling on the ground in agony. Trelawney sat where she had been knocked down, shaking, and looking horrified at what had happened.

Dumbledore stunned Sprout to temporarily put her out of her misery. "I think the test has been successfully completed. You two may go continue with your training as usual." Ginny had only fired four spells.

As they turned to go, McGonagall touched Harry's shoulder to stop him for a moment. "Was that really necessary, Harry?"

"As Mad-Eye says, if it's not realistic, it's not much of a test. I personally hope this is the last one of these we have to waste our time on. We have far more important things to be doing. If you'll excuse us, Ginny has some seventh year spells to learn today." He politely nodded and smiled at her before he left. Harry would have almost sworn he saw a smile trying to get to the stern professor's face, but he did not wait to find out.

Just as Harry made it to the door, the Headmaster arrived levitating Professor Sprout, still mercifully unconscious. "You'll want to be at dinner this evening. There will be a couple of important announcements made at that time. Oh, and Harry, I believe you have proved your point and I don't think we will need any more of these tests."

Harry smiled, "Thank you for the warning and the consideration." He and Ginny went to his defense classroom and Portkeyed to the Manor for their normal work.

On their way to the library, Harry told Ginny, "Excellent job!" They both laughed. "So, I think that we'll quit at six tonight for dinner at the castle. Afterwards, you may have the rest of the night off to do anything you want."

"Anything?" she asked coyly.

"Anything. I'm also available if you need me," he told her with a smile.

"I think another rogue lesson in the Defense classroom sounds good, assuming you can help me find a rogue," she said teasingly.

"You mean the lessons where the rogue shows his woman how he really feels about her?"

"Uh-huh, I want my rogue," she told him with a wink as they entered the library. Not only would the reward be good, but the task had been a pleasure to perform, not to mention easy. But then, she had a good teacher, she thought.

"Well, look who the cat dragged in," Ron said as Harry and Ginny sat down for dinner in the Great Hall for the first time since last Sunday night.

"Oh, shut it, Ron," his sister told him. "We are allowed to take a night off from training occasionally."

"Such as when the Headmaster tells us there are going to be some announcements," Harry added.

"What?" Hermione asked eagerly.

"Don't know, he just said we should be here," Harry told her as he helped himself to a pork chop.

As Ginny finished dinner, she realized she had made a mistake by not stopping off at the loo before dinner. She did not want to miss the announcements, but decided she just could not wait. "Back in a minute, Harry," she told him quietly. "I gotta go..."

He smirked at her and she smacked him playfully on the arm and left for a few minutes.

As most everyone was starting dessert, the Headmaster stood up and clinked his goblet with his knife. "May I have your attention please? Thank you. Right before the end of last term, I suggested everyone bring some nice robes or garments back with you just in case they were needed. I hope everyone did that, or can send off for some, as we will have a school dance for those in fourth year and above for Valentines Day. For those in third year and below who are not invited by an older student, we will have alternative activities." About half the students brightened at hearing that, the other half seemed to panic slightly; the reactions were generally divided by gender.



"We are doing this because there have been enough Death Eater attacks that we feel it is best to cancel Hogsmeade weekends for the foreseeable future," the Headmaster announced. There were plenty of groans for that announcement.

"Please make your plans accordingly. For you older students, you do not have to have a date to go to the dance. For you young men who want to bring a date, I encourage you to ask sooner rather than later," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye before he sat down.

"This should be fun," Hermione said.

"Yeah." Ron looked like he was about to start hyperventilating, but managed to speak anyway. "Hermione? Would you come to the dance with me?"

She smiled. "Are you ready to make us official?"

Harry found it interesting that Ron was the one who would not announce their dating.

Ron stared at her for a moment before he finally said, "Yes."

"Then I'll go with you, Ron," his girlfriend told him. "Oh look, here comes Ginny. She missed the announcements. Well, Harry, I guess you'll have to fill her in when you ask her."

Harry turned to see Ginny coming down the length of the table. About six seats before she returned, Colin Creevey put out his hand to grab her arm. "Hey Ginny!"

Ginny almost fell over as she was jerked backward. "What is it, Colin?" she asked with some exasperation in her voice, but he did not seem to notice or care.

"Will you go to the dance with me? I'm sure I must be the first one to ask you," he said excitedly.

"There's going to be a dance? I can't believe I missed the announcements," she said in frustration.

Colin was still excited. "Yeah, it's going to be on Valentine's Day. So, shall I wait for you in the common room?"

"Let's go out in the foyer to talk about this Colin, that way we can discuss it in detail." Ginny finally looked up at Harry, who looked like he was about to hex someone. She smiled and winked at him before she turned back to Colin to walk him to the foyer.

"What's she up to?" Ron asked. "Why would she abandon Harry?"

"She's not, Ron," Hermione told him. "Didn't you see the smile and wink? She's up to something, and I can guess what."

Harry felt better after Ginny's wink, but he still was not sure what was going on. When Ginny and Colin left the Great Hall, he turned to Hermione to ask her what she thought was going on, when he heard a scream come from the foyer. A few seconds later, a very pleased looking Ginny came back into the Great Hall. Everyone watched her walk over and sit back down next to Harry.

"What happened?" Harry asked her.

"Oh, well, Colin didn't seem to understand my other noes, so I thought that maybe my Bat Bogey hex would get the point across," she stated quite calmly. "So Harry, I understand there's to be a dance on Valentine's Day."

Harry raised an eyebrow and teased her. "Yes there is. I was going to ask you, but since the last person who did received your Bat Bogey hex, I'm not sure I should now."

"Well, if you don't ask me, I guess I'll have to go apologize to the twit and then go with him," she teased back.

He was about to laugh when he saw Professor McGonagall walk up. "Miss Weasley. Is there a problem? I heard a scream just before you walked back in, and Mr. Creevey has not returned."

"Actually, there is a problem. May I talk to you about it after dinner?" Ginny looked quite serious.

McGonagall had not expected that answer, but she told the girl, "Very well. Please come find me in my quarters after dinner. You may use my door near the Gryffindor Tower entrance." She returned to the head table.

As their teacher left, Harry looked at Ginny. "There's to be a dance because the Hogsmeade trips are cancelled. He also said that he announced last term to bring something nicer to wear back with us. Obviously, I didn't know about that."

"Oh, I didn't do that either; I forgot, not that I have that much that's nice anyway," she said sadly.

Harry looked at her and wished he could get something really nice for her. Then it hit him, he could and it would solve his problem too. "If you'll come with me to the dance, I have an idea on robes for you."

"Harry, I don't want you to go buy something for me just for a school dance." She had said that with some disdain, but Harry could tell she still really wanted to go.

"Ginny, trust me, and at least let me show you my idea tomorrow. If you don't like it, we'll figure out something else, OK?"

She looked at him and could see how much he wanted this, or maybe wanted her. She could not turn him down. "All right. I'll look at your idea tomorrow. And Harry? Even if I don't like it, I'll still spend the evening with you."

"Thanks Ginny." That little episode with Colin gave him new insight into himself. Now he just had to act on it.

After dinner, Harry escorted Ginny to see Professor McGonagall. "Yes, Miss Weasley, what seems to be the problem?" her Head-of-House asked her after they all were seated.

"Professor, the problem is Colin. I've lost count of the number of times he's tried to ask me out, and I've told him 'no' every time, and I've asked him to stop asking. Still, he persists. If my little hex tonight does not convince him to stop, my next alternative is to let Harry go have a talk with him, and knowing Harry like I do, I think Colin will wind up in the hospital wing."

McGonagall looked shocked at hearing that, and at seeing the smile on Harry's face.

"So, I'd like to minimize my contact with Colin by resigning as prefect. Colin seems to like to ask me during our prefect patrols. Please pick another fifth year girl as soon as possible," Ginny requested.

"Miss Weasley? Why did you not come tell me sooner?" her Head-of-House asked.

"Because for the longest time, I thought it wasn't any big deal and that I could handle it," Ginny explained. "I also thought that after a few times of hearing 'no', he would quit. There have been several other boys who have tried to ask me out. None of them have asked me more than two or three times before they quit. How was I to know Colin would be so persistent, and, well, obsessed?"

McGonagall looked thoughtful for a moment. "I see. Could I talk you into staying on a prefect and finding someone to replace Mr. Creevey?"

"Only if you really can't find anyone else, Professor," Ginny answered with weariness. "Personally, I'd prefer to drop the duties to have more free time. I know the duties aren't much, but every extra free hour I can get is useful. I need the time to do homework or train."

"I'm sure, Miss Weasley, but please be careful not to overdo it. You need to have a balanced life, too," McGonagall encouraged her.

"As soon as I'm trained, I will cut back. But I've finally come to understand what Harry has been trying to tell me. The stuff we learn here in school is nice, but most of it won't do anything to help me stay alive when Death Eaters attack. Until I get to the point where I can't

get much better defending myself, my schoolwork and everything else with it will have to take second priority. If that means I lose the status of being a prefect, so be it."

"That's a pretty severe way to look at it, Miss Weasley."

"Professor, as Harry said to one of his classes: Defense Against the Dark Arts is about being alive or dead; no other class is based on that premise. When I heard that, I finally understood my priorities," Ginny stated and looked at her teacher.

Her teacher looked back at her, and then over to Harry, who had a very serene look on his face. Minerva wasn't sure what to make of these two. "Very well, Miss Weasley; I'll accept your resignation as prefect. That means I'll have to find two fifth year prefects."

Ginny nodded her acknowledgement and handed her prefect badge over. "Thank you, Professor. Now if you don't mind, I have an appointment with my boyfriend. I believe he said something about some free time for a reward for doing well on a test today."

As they left, Minerva still did not know what to think about those two. It was obvious they were about to go find some broom closet or an alcove somewhere; yet, less than a minute ago they were discussing life and death.

Knowing her students as she did, Minerva already knew who she needed to talk to. In Gryffindor Tower, Colin was not pleased to hear he was no longer a prefect, but he understood why, and promised he would leave Ginny alone. Jack and Amanda were very surprised to get prefect badges.

(Sat 1 Feb)

After their usual Saturday morning workout, shower, and breakfast; Harry led Ginny up to the master bedroom.

"And what lesson have you planned for in here, Harry?" she teased him.

"I thought I'd show you how happy I could make you," he shot back.

She blushed and tried to determine exactly what he meant by that as he opened a door she had not seen behind before. Harry pulled out some boxes from just inside so they could walk in. Turning on the light, he gave her a small bow and waved her in. "Have a look Ginny. I'm sure there must be a dress robe in there that you'll like."

"Really?"

"Yep; I'll need to find one too, but I believe there's a pretty wide variety considering how full the closet is," he told her.

Ginny slowly walked in and stared. Even Madam Malkin did not have robes this nice. "Harry? I can't; these are too good."

"Nonsense, Ginny; nothing is too good for you. And just think, you won't even have to buy it; consider it a loan."

She pulled out a lavender one and held it up to her. It was exquisite, though not what she was looking for. Almost every one she pulled out was a color that would look good on her. She didn't understand it. Finally, she found an ivory colored dress with gold and maroon highlights. The colors seemed so Gryffindor'ish. She turned to Harry who was looking through the men's robes hanging further down. "I think I like this one."

"Well, go try it on, the bathroom is over there," he pointed out.

When she returned, Harry had some robes he thought might work for him. Looking up, he almost dropped what he was holding. It was beautiful on her, very elegant with a hint of cleavage showing, yet not too much. "You're going to be the best looking girl there, Ginny."

"Thanks, Harry, but it needs a little altering. Whoever wore it last was a couple of inches taller than I am, and maybe one size larger than I am." She paused while looking at the dress again. "You know what's really amazing? Almost everything in there is a color that looks good on me."

Harry looked at her, then he started to chuckle. "And I think I know why."

"OK, why?"

He put his robes down and walked over to the dresser and picked up a photo there Ginny had not noticed before. When he handed it to her, she was about to say she did not remember this photo of him and her being taken. Suddenly, she understood. "It's your dad and mum, isn't it?"

"Yes. It was shortly before they were married, or so Moony tells me. Her hair is a little darker than yours, and assuming I'm about my dad's height, you can tell that my mum was a little taller than you are. So I believe that would make those robes hers; and being a redhead too, yeah, they should look good on you."

Ginny gasped. "Harry? I can't wear these then. There's no way, I'll mess these up."

"Nonsense!" he told her again. "I want you to wear whatever you like in there. Winky?" The elf popped in. "Winky, can you sew?"

"Oh yes, Master Harry."

"Excellent. Please help Ginny, then. I believe she said those robes need to be altered. I'll be back in a minute." Harry left for the bathroom.

A few minutes later, he came out. "So, what do you think?" He had black robes with maroon edging and highlights.

"Oh, Harry, those will look great with my robes. They look very nice on you too," Ginny told him as Winky was pinning up the hem.

"Excellent, we'll match then. Mine already fit, so I'm good. Winky can fix those while we have our lessons today, then we can take them back with us. One more thing for you." Harry walked back over to the dresser and opened a box. Digging through it, he grabbed something.

"Here, I found this when I first moved in." He handed her a large ruby pendent on a golden chain.

Ginny started to protest, but his look stopped her. She put it on and turned slightly to look in the mirror. It went well with the dress. When she smiled, he held out his hand again. Rolling her eyes at him as he grinned at her, she saw he had handed her a pair ruby earrings. "Harry, you're much too good for me."

"Just taking care of the one who means the most to me," he told her. For the rest of the day, she was so happy that she seemed to be able to do everything right.

(Mon 3 Feb)

Over the weekend, Harry had come to a realization and a decision. The realization was that if he was going to take Ginny to a dance, he was going to have to dance. He cared for her enough that he did not want to make this as bad for her as he had for Parvati at the Yule Ball in his fourth year. The decision was what to do about it, and he had a plan.

After he took Ginny to the Manor for her Monday lessons, he pulled Moony aside and told him he had to go back to the castle for an hour or so to take care of a small problem with his classes, then he would be back. Moony told him to go on. But once Harry was alone at the Floo in the foyer, he changed his destination to "The Burrow".

When he came out of the fireplace, he called out, "Mrs. Weasley? Are you here?"

"Harry?" Mrs. Weasley called back as she came into the room drying her hands with a dish towel. "What are you doing here? You should be in school."

"One of the advantages of being a professor is that I can leave for short amounts of time to take care of personal things." He put on his best sad puppy dog face, the one that would get him almost anything with Ginny. "I really need your help with something, Mrs. Weasley."



She smiled at him, "What do you need, Harry?"

He found this a bit embarrassing, but his need motivated him to ask anyway. "I need you to teach me to dance. I've never had anyone to teach me, and I have this big social thing coming up where I might have to."

"Ah, the Valentine's dance," she said wistfully as if having a fond memory.

"You know?"

"I just got Ginny's letter this morning. It's very sweet of you to take her Harry. She is looking forward to it," Mrs. Weasley told him.

"Right. Well, I don't want to disappoint her by not being able to dance, but could you not tell her I'm doing this?"

Molly laughed. "I understand, Harry. Come to the other room with me. I'll put on some music and show you the basics. How long do you have?"

"Uh, an hour or so today, and for the next few days," he told her.

"That should be enough to make sure you both have an enjoyable time. If only Ron would let me teach him." Molly led the way to the living room with the wireless.

"Harry?" Molly put a gentle hand on his shoulder before they started. "I wanted you to know that I appreciate you helping Ginny to be able to defend herself. I'm afraid that I reacted a tad more severely than I should have when we had so much trouble over Christmas. I've had trouble letting go of each of our children as they grow up. As strange as it may seem, it doesn't get any easier. It's time I started letting go with Ron and Ginny, and well, with you too."

He smiled and gave her a hug, which she returned. "Thank you for telling me that. I really do have your family's best interest at heart."

"I know you do," she agreed. "It's just hard on me to let you act like an adult. I'll get better, though I'll warn it may be a while before I completely let go; and in some sense, once a mum always a mum."

Harry grinned. "I understand and appreciate it."

She let go of him and walked over to put on some music. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll be a mum for you a little while longer. I think all boys should have a mum somewhere to teach them to dance." The next hour was somewhat frustrating for Harry, but he appreciated Mrs. Weasley greatly.

(Fri 14 Feb)

They had called a halt to their lessons at five today so they could have an early dinner at the Manor, and then Ginny could come back and start getting ready for the dance. She appreciated Harry doing that, as the rest of the girls had to wait for dinner at six, then start getting ready afterwards. This plan gave her an extra hour, and time in the bathroom while the others were eating.

Harry quickly got ready and then sat in the common room with his Herbology book. The tutoring with Neville was going well, but he was still working to catch up. It wasn't long until all their friends came back from dinner, the girls rushing to get ready since they had a little less than two hours; the boys taking their time knowing they would be ready long before the girls. Neville was the first to join him waiting.

"Hey Harry, looking sharp, there," Neville told him.

"Thanks, you too. You can't go wrong in basic black," Harry replied pointing at his friend's robes.

"Nope, don't think so; but I hope that Susan Bones likes it. By the way, I wanted to tell you thanks for the extra Defense lessons, I feel like I'm doing a lot better."

"That's because you are, Neville," Harry told him with a smile. "As I told you the other day, how well you do a lot of the spells is determined by how confident you are. That's especially true with the

harder spells like the Patronus. You've changed a lot over the last year, and your confidence has grown too."

"Thanks, Harry. You know, you've changed a lot since last year too. You're calmer, and a lot more powerful. Some of the stuff you've been showing me in the lessons is just amazing. I can't believe you're starting to do wandless magic."

"Well, learning enough to pass your NEWTs will do that to you." They both laughed and enjoyed the time.

Ron came down and joined them. He had some basic black robes, older, but presentable. Harry was glad his friend had outgrown the lacy ones that had embarrassed him so much two years ago.

"You look nice, Harry," his best mate told him.

"Thanks, Ron, you too; but you should see Ginny. I know I'm a bit biased, but I think she'll be the best looking girl there." Harry looked up and saw his date starting to come down. His awestruck look clued his friends into looking at the girls' staircase. They sat silently and stared, too.

"I know I'm a little early, but I'm done," she told him.

Harry rose and slowly went over to her and gave her the gentlest of kisses. "I knew you'd look good, but I think you're absolutely gorgeous tonight. You look like a queen."

Ginny gave him a light laugh. "Well, thank you, Mr. Potter. You're pretty spiffing too. I do like those robes on you."

"Hey Ginny? Where did you get those robes and jewelry?" Ron asked. "I've never seen anything like them before."

"A good friend lent them to me for the evening. Don't worry about it, Ron," she told him in a voice that indicated he should drop the subject.

"But Ginny, you know..."

Before Harry or Ginny could say anything, Neville did. "Ron, for once, why don't you shut it and leave them alone to have a good time? Forget she's your sister for the evening and make everyone happy, including yourself." He shook his head at Ron's thickness. To Neville, it seemed that Ron kept alternating between being all right with Harry and Ginny being together, and hating them being together. "If you all will excuse me, I need to go find my date." He left a speechless Ron behind as he headed for the corridor that lead to the Hufflepuff area.

"I think we should slowly walk to the dance," Harry suggested so they could get away. He led his date to his room, where he threw his text book in, before they left Ron to think about what had happened.

Harry and Ginny slowly walked to the Great Hall, stopping at an alcove on the way for a few minutes, though Ginny was insistent that Harry not mess up her hair. While there, Harry conjured up a golden rose and pinned it on her. Ginny liked the look and the thought. They arrived at the same time the Great Hall was opened.

After a few minutes, the Headmaster introduced a four person band named "The Wizz". They played a mixture of styles. Their second song was a bit slower and Harry thought that a waltz might work. Harry got Ginny's attention away from Susan Bones and Neville as he asked her, "Ginny, would you dance with me?"

She looked shocked. "Really? I thought you didn't dance?"

"I'm not a big dancer, but I don't want you to be bored all night."

Ginny smiled at him and let herself be led out onto the dance floor. There were only a few other couples dancing, so it was easy to avoid colliding with anyone.

Harry did his best to remember what Mrs. Weasley had taught him. After five one-hour lessons, he was able to handle himself -- barely. Doing his best to pay attention both to his feet and her, he led her around the floor. Ginny talked with him as they danced, and he answered her in short answers.

"Not bad, Harry. I was afraid we would be visiting with people all night. That would not have been bad, but I like that you're willing to do this. And you're dancing well too."

"For you Ginny, I'll try a lot I would not normally try." Harry thought this was getting a little easier as the song continued and he was becoming more confident.

Albus Dumbledore looked out over the sea of students. Many were standing around the edges and talking, though a few were starting to dance. He noticed that Harry and Ginny were on the dance floor. He smiled to himself at Harry's willingness to do that, as compared to two years ago during the Tri-Wizard Tournament's Ball. They were both dressed splendidly, better than anyone else here. Harry must have been spending some of the Potter money.

As he continued to look at them, a memory suddenly came to him. It was from another dance around nineteen years ago. Another couple was wearing those same robes and dancing, a black-haired and red-haired couple too. Suddenly, it all clicked. He knew where Harry was staying, how Harry traveled home, and where the robes had come from. Albus also suspected that were he to try and get there, he would not be able to. Still, it was nice to have that particular mystery solved.

As the song came to an end, Dumbledore watched another young man approach Harry.

Harry felt a hand tapping him on the shoulder as the song ended and the next began. He did not know who it could be, but the look on Ginny's face should have clued him in. Turning, he saw Colin standing there.

"May I cut in?" the blond boy asked.

"I don't think so, Colin," Harry politely told him. "You were requested to keep your distance."

"You can't have her all to yourself; you're not the best choice for her," Colin retorted.

Harry could not believe this was happening and tried using his teacher voice. "Mr. Creevey, I think you need to leave the dance floor."

"I don't think so." Though Colin had taken a step backward, he had also pulled out his wand.

Not understanding what was happening, but not wanting to take any chances, Harry immediately stepped forward and knocked the boy's wand to the side with his left hand while he drew his wand with his right hand. Unfortunately, Colin did not drop the wand, so Harry started casting "Reflectere!" A shimmering column came up around Colin as the boy cast "Stupefy!" The red light came out of Colin's wand and bounced inside the shimmering column around him a few times before it hit him and he collapsed.

The Headmaster came rushing up, wand in hand. "Nice containment and reaction time Harry." Dumbledore removed the shimmering containment field to check on the boy. "I'll take him to the hospital wing. Please do not worry yourself about him any longer. He will not be returning soon."

It was only then that both Harry and Ginny realized that the music had stopped and everyone was looking at them. "Come on, let's leave for awhile," Harry told his date. He led her out towards the rose garden outside, his wand still in his hand until they found a nice place in the garden.

"I'm sorry, Ginny," Harry told her as he wrapped her in his arms, which she gratefully let encircle her and drew comfort from.

"No, it's not your fault, Harry. He's been sort of like that all year. It's just gotten bad since Christmas. Good job on the Containment spell; I see why you were trying to teach it to me."

"It's easy to take down, but if the person isn't expecting it, it is very handy." Harry squeezed her in his hug again. "You know what I'm most sorry for?" She shook her head. "I'm sorry this night is ruined like this. I wanted to make it really special for you."

"Oh Harry, it is special. I got to come here with you, dance with you, and wear these wonderful robes. I don't know what more I could ask for," she sincerely told him.

Harry took a deep breath, this was his moment; he just had to do it. He had been planning this for almost two weeks since he had figured it out. "I can think of one more thing that you deserve, Ginny. Something I should have given you long ago, but I was just too thick to understand."

"What, Harry?"

"Ginny, I -- I love you. Maybe you already knew how I felt, but I thought you should hear it for..." Harry felt her lips against his cutting off his words. It had taken him quite some time, but he finally had figured out why he felt so possessive about her, why he wanted to be near her, and why she made everything right. It was love.

As they broke apart, Ginny nuzzled her face into the base of his neck and into his hair. "I love you too, Harry. I'm so glad you figured that out."

"I get the feeling you've been waiting on me."

She giggled into his ear, which sent shivers down his spine. "Yes, Harry. I could have told you how I felt for a long time, but I didn't tell you because I wanted you to figure it out without feeling pressured. But now that you have figured this out, know that I love you very much, Harry Potter."

Harry did not care if they returned to the dance or not, and now, Ginny did not care either. With the occasional warming spell for comfort, between snogging and talking, they barely made it back to Gryffindor Tower by curfew.

## Chapter 14: Can It Get Any Worse?

(Fri 28 Feb)

It seemed like everything was going wrong this morning, or so Harry thought. First he had overslept; it was not by much, but he was still late. Nevertheless, by the time he was dressed, Ginny still had not shown up. Not knowing what else to do, he transformed into his phoenix form and flashed to her bed. Thankfully, her curtains had been drawn so he was shielded from her roommates, who were already waking up. When he landed on her bed, she woke and screamed, which meant he had to flash back to his room immediately, as her roommates ran over to see what was wrong. Still, she had awakened and seen him, which meant she realized that she had overslept too. They had lost half their workout time by the time she met him downstairs.

The workout had not gone well either, as Harry had pulled a muscle in his hurry to start exercising; he had not taken long enough to stretch first. While he was able to mostly heal himself, he was still slightly sore. That effectively ended their workout for the day, so they each showered in their rooms and changed into school clothes before Harry Portkeyed them back to Harry's room. Their haste had been so great, neither of them had bothered to dry their hair that morning.

Most unfortunately for them, when they exited Harry's room fifteen minutes after breakfast had started, Ron was walking through, having overslept himself. When he saw them come out of Harry's room, both obviously having just finished taking a shower, he exploded. "What have you been doing with my sister?" he yelled at Harry.

"Calm down, Ron, nothing has happened," Harry tried to placate his friend, but Ron was not listening.

Ron continued to stride over to Harry, an angry look on his face. "I said, what have you done to her?"

Harry looked at Ginny, and she looked angry herself. That settled it for Harry, this was going to stop now.



"Ron, shut it and listen to me," Harry told his friend, his voice rising. Fortunately for them, no one else was in the common room. Ron kept coming and took a swing at his friend when he got into range. Harry easily dodged it and grabbed his arm as it went by, twisted it behind Ron's back, and he shoved Ron up against the wall next to the door to the Head Boy's room where Harry lived. Ron grunted loudly and with anger.

In a low intense voice, Harry told his best mate, "Ron, shut the hell up and listen to me, and listen well because I'm only going to say this once. I am sick and tired of you acting like a big protective git around your sister. She's a big girl now and can take care of herself. I can not make her do anything she does not want to do, nor would I want to."

Ron continued to struggle and pushed backwards trying to get away. "Let go, you git!"

Harry had the strength and the leverage to keep him where he was, and shoved Ron back against the wall. "Shut up, Ron! Now, as I was trying to say, I'm tired of you doing and saying these kinds of things, and this is the last time I'll be nice and tell you stop. Don't you realize it makes you look stupid? In case you hadn't realized it, it insults me, as you make me out to be someone who takes advantage of girls. It also insults Ginny as it makes her out to be someone who is stupid enough to be taken advantage of, or worse. You can make yourself look stupid all you want, but I am tired of being insulted, and I will not allow you to insult Ginny any longer."

Again Ron gave a big heave to try to get loose, and again Harry shoved him back against the wall. Ron let out another "Uff" as he hit the wall.

"Next time you do insult us, best mate or not, I will take action you will regret," Harry warned him. "But what you really need to keep in mind, Ron, is that after I have made you sorry you did that, I'm going to hand your sorry arse over to Ginny." Harry turned his head, "You want to add anything Ginny?" She nodded, so Harry pushed back from Ron, though he remained ready to fight.

Ron slowly turned around with anger and fear on his face. Ginny walked up to him, placed her hand on his chest, and with muscles from two months of hard workouts, she shoved him the half step back to the wall and put her wand at the top of his neck and pressed it slightly into his flesh under his chin. Ron was not concerned that she would do a spell, but he was concerned that she would use her wand like a knife and stab him.

"Ronald Weasley, I hope you listened to Harry very carefully, as I completely agree with everything he said. We weren't doing anything wrong, yet you always jump to wrong conclusions and make me out to be some sort of a -- well, something I'm not. So from now on, if you don't like what you see, then I suggest you either close your eyes or leave; because if you say anything like that ever again, if Harry doesn't send you to Madam Pomfrey, I will. And if I catch you first, I'll give you to Harry when I'm finished with you, and he knows some very nasty spells. Do you understand us?" Ginny looked at her brother, who just stood there. "I said, do you understand us?"

Ron finally nodded slightly feeling the point of her wand pressing into his flesh.

Ginny started walking away, but after three steps, she turned. "And Ron, just so you know I'm serious about this, you'll be lucky if this is all that happens to you. Chiroptera Mucosus!" Her brother screamed as the little creatures started trying to come out of his nose. Harry just closed the door to his room and walked Ginny to breakfast. Ron was left to himself kneeling on the floor in the common room. Their anger was only half abated by the time they reached the Great Hall.

As they sat down next to Hermione, who was already half way through her breakfast, their brunette friend asked, "Has either of you seen Ron? I think he must have overslept."

"Yeah," Harry answered. "I saw him in the Tower dealing with a personal issue. As soon as he figures out what's really important, I'm sure he'll be down." Ginny giggled at that.

Hermione gave Harry an odd look, but he did not elaborate. She did not see Ron until their first class, and he was not happy. He also would not answer her questions on what had happened that morning. While his morning classes had gone reasonably well, his bad luck continued as he was to meet Dumbledore for one of his bi-monthly meetings.

Walking into the Headmaster's office, Harry stroked Fawkes' head a few times and smiled at the bird. Fawkes gave him a short trill as Harry finished the petting. The short song helped his mood slightly.

Dumbledore chuckled. "I see you still have your touch with Fawkes. He still likes you. The elves have given us yesterday's lamb chops it appears. Shall we start on that as you tell me how your classes are going?"

Harry sat and got ready to eat. "They're going as well as usual. On the standardized tests, the average score is slightly above normal, and I'm finding that most students can do most of the spells. The ones who are having trouble have been directed to my helpers for tutoring."

"Very good. I also looked over the last round of tests and am quite pleased with what I see. You're doing a fine job, Harry. I've also sent the results of those tests to the board of governors, and that has helped to calm the doubters about your ability to do the job; so well done, Harry, very well done."

"Thank you, Headmaster." Harry took another few bites as the Headmaster seemed to be thinking something through. The next words took him totally by surprise.

"Harry, you've been staying at Potter Manor and Estates, haven't you?"

Harry almost choked and hoped that he had kept a straight face, but he was not totally sure he had. "Potter Manor and Estates?"

"Yes, your ancestral home. I suppose I'm not surprised, it is an excellent place with its many wonderful features. You're grandparents and I were friends, and I occasionally visited them there," Dumbledore casually told him. "But you know, I found it most interesting that when I went to visit it the other day to refresh my memory of how it looked. It was completely gone as if it had never existed. I must congratulate you on your spell work to hide it; you've done an excellent job."

Not sure what to say, Harry kept quiet and continued to eat.

After a few moments, Dumbledore easily continued. "What finally tipped me off were the robes you and Miss Weasley wore. You could not have possibly known, but your parents wore those exact same robes to Frank and Alice Longbottom's wedding. When I saw you two dancing, it was as if time had been rolled back. I appreciate the reminder of the fond memory."

Deciding he had to say something, yet not wanting to admit anything, Harry finally said, "I'm glad you enjoyed the memory."

"You know, Harry, that explains so much I had not understood too. You see, I had wondered how you got around so easily. Your early Apparation license is one explanation, but I wondered if there was more. And then there was the House of Black, and how you controlled Mrs. Black's portrait. Once I understood you had access to Potter Manor, it became clear to me that you had opened the Potter family vault, and probably the Black family vault too. That would have given you access to a very old magic, the Manor Family keys. There are not many families that have them, so guard them well, Harry."

"I do my best to guard everything and everyone I care about," Harry said evenly, still admitting to nothing.

Albus was not sure if he was surprised or not that Harry would neither conform nor deny anything he had said, but he knew he was right. He decided to let it go. "I have some good news for you Harry. Healers at St. Mungo's determined that Mr. Creevey was under an Imperious Curse. His strange behavior was from him fighting it and it only partially working. Apparently, Draco Malfoy had placed it on him at

the beginning of the school year to try to get Miss Weasley away from any protection at Hogwarts, hopefully during the Hogsmeade weekends. Fortunately, you were present and that plan failed."

"That's good to hear, I suppose. I did think his obsessive behavior was very strange."

"If I may, I'd like to ask you and Miss Weasley to talk to him briefly when he returns Sunday evening, to assure him that everything is all right between you," the Headmaster requested.

"Oh, yeah, sure. I suppose it will be a bit awkward, but we can do that," Harry agreed. "If that's OK with Ginny," he hastily added as he considered that maybe she would not want to see Colin.

"Excellent Harry, I think Miss Weasley will agree and I appreciate your willingness. I'm sure Mr. Creevey will feel a bit awkward too, but hopefully we can get him back into the swing of things." Dumbledore finished his pudding and started his last topic as he put his empty bowl down. "Harry, there is one more thing we need to discuss; and while I do not want to discuss it, as it is an unpleasant topic, I feel you need to know this recently uncovered information."

Harry raised an eyebrow at the old man and slowly put his empty pudding bowl down as well.

"I have proved my theory on how Tom Riddle stayed alive when the Killing Curse hit him all those years ago. He accomplished it with some very Dark Magic; he created a Horcrux, or more specifically, six Horcruxes. It is an object that is used to store part of your soul in, with the idea being that if you are killed, then because all of your soul can not leave this plane of existence, then the rest of your soul must stay too."

A sick feeling came over Harry. "While I can guess, what does that mean to me specifically?"

"It means," Dumbledore explained, "that before you can completely get rid of Voldemort, that the six Horcruxes must be destroyed first; hence my warning to you not to engage Voldemort in a fight at this

time. Even if you killed his body, we would again have to start hunting his spirit down, and almost certainly, he would be forewarned that we knew his secret for staying alive, and that he would do something else to protect himself and we probably would not uncover it."

Harry really did want to lose his lunch now, and it was with great difficulty that he resisted the urge to hurl. "I was afraid you were going to say something like that. How do we know there's only six?"

"That information came from a chance remark a student Tom Riddle made to Professor Horace Slughorn many years ago." Harry looked at Dumbledore in surprise. "Yes, interesting that Tom was interested in immortality even at that early of an age. Anyway, you will be happy to know that I have tracked down four of them, though alas, I only have three in my possession."

"I don't understand. How can you know about four, but only have three?" Harry wondered.

"There is a simple, though unfortunate, reason for that. One of the Horcruxes that I tracked down had been taken by someone else, and a fake had been left in its place. That actually makes the situation even worse as I've been unable to track down the R.A.B. person who did that. Therefore, it will be very hard to find the Locket of Slytherin," Dumbledore told him.

"R.A.B. and a locket," Harry spoke very softly as he thought out loud. "Would that be a gold locket with snakes on it?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"There was a locket like that which I removed from Sirius' house when I removed all of his possessions. It did not open, so I just put it back into the box to be looked at later," Harry told him.

"Yes," the twinkle suddenly became very pronounced in the Headmaster's eyes. "Sirius did have a younger brother named Regulus too. Harry, can I have that locket?"

"Sure, I can get it for you tomorrow, if you like," Harry offered nonchalantly.

"Perhaps I should come get it this afternoon. I would not want you to be hurt by it," Dumbledore offered.

"There's no problem. I already tried to open it and was not hurt. I'll just carefully hold it by its chain and bring it to you," Harry denied the request. "You mentioned you knew about four. What about the others, both known and unknown?"

Dumbledore sighed. He did care about the boy and his well-being, nevertheless, he was not surprised Harry would not allow anyone else to go to his house. "The first Horcrux was Riddle's Diary, which you destroyed in your second year here."

"Seriously?"

"Yes, so you can see how powerful the magic we're dealing with is. He also made one out of the Gaunt family ring. And I've found one in a hair comb once owned by Ravenclaw. Those are the known ones."

"So, he put them in things that were either his or from the Founders of Hogwarts?" Harry guessed.

Dumbledore nodded. "Very good Harry. You have correctly seen the pattern. I am quite certain another is in a teacup that was once owned by Hufflepuff, and I have an idea as to where that is. In fact, I would like you to come with me to retrieve it tomorrow afternoon. The last ones were very tricky to get, and I would appreciate the help, and I also thought that you might like to be present."

"Actually, I would," Harry told him with enthusiasm that surprised even himself. He was starting to look forward to the final battle and real life beyond that. "I'd also like Moony to come with us. He's well versed in many Dark Magics."

"I'm not sure it's wise for this knowledge to be given out so freely, Harry," the old man mildly objected.

"As I plan to tell him anyway, I see no reason not to take him and his expertise," Harry countered.

Albus sighed. "Very well, Harry. Please have him be here at one in the afternoon, and the three of us can go."

Harry nodded. "You haven't mentioned the last one."

"Correct, and alas, I'm not certain about it. By all logic, it should be an item of Gryffindor's; but all of Godric's possessions are accounted for and are Horcrux-free. I had briefly thought that maybe he had stored that last part of his soul in Nagini, his snake, but as I recently killed her and found no Horcrux there, I'm left in a state of puzzlement," Dumbledore finished wearily.

Harry very slowly said, "I see," as he thought about it. Research needed to be done, and there was a good way to solve that. "I have a thought, let me pursue it and I'll let you know in a couple of weeks."

The Headmaster mentally congratulated himself at the way this conversation had gone, and for Harry's desire to get together again. He hoped their relationship was on the mend. "Excellent, Harry, I look forward to hearing what you find."

Looking at his watch and noticing it was slightly after one, Harry rose to leave. "Headmaster? A quick question, if I may? If I'm asked to play on the Gryffindor Quidditch team, may I do so?"

With a smile, the Headmaster asked, "What do you think the answer should be Harry?"

"Since I'm more professor than student, I would expect you to tell me 'no', and that the other teams would not appreciate it," Harry honestly answered.

Dumbledore smiled and agreed, "I think that is a good and very mature answer."

Harry nodded and left to go meet Ginny for their afternoon training. He was sad that his Quidditch days at Hogwarts were over; and yet, it



was a small relief as he did not want to spend the time in the practices.

When Harry and Ginny returned that evening, Harry had the locket in his pocket. Entering the common room in the Tower, they saw Hermione sitting at a table studying. Only Hermione would study on a Friday night, Harry thought. Then he heard her call them both over.

"Harry, Ginny, I need to talk with you."

"Yeah, sure, give me just a minute though," Harry told her. He went into his room and put the locket in his trunk for safety. Returning to the two girls, he said, "What's up?"

"Harry, can you please tell me what happened this morning? It took me all day, and what I finally got out of Ron makes no sense," the bushy brunette told him.

"He's still angry at me, I take it?" His friend nodded. "And at Ginny too?"

"Somewhat, but he told me you and he fought, and then you threatened him. That doesn't sound like you, yet he seemed so certain." Hermione looked confused.

"That's partially correct, and very correct, though it sounds like he left some other parts of the story out," Harry said calmly.

"Then will you please tell me? I want to help you two work it out. This is so much like our fourth year it hurts."

Harry sighed. "You're not that far off." Hermione's eyes widened at that admission. "Look, the short version is that Ron saw both of us this morning with wet hair coming out of my room. He made an accusation that I had done something with Ginny that he didn't approve of."

Hermione closed her eyes as she groaned and started shaking her head slightly. It was obvious where this story was going.

"I tried to explain to him that things weren't what he was guessing, but he wouldn't listen to me and tried to hit me. I dodged and threw him against the wall and told him that I was tired of hearing him say things like that and wasn't going to stand for it anymore. It made him look stupid, and insulted both Ginny and myself. I did tell him that if he did it again, he would be sorry and then I'd give him to Ginny. After that, I let Ginny talk to him, and she gave him the same message, before she Bat Bogeyed him." Harry looked at his good friend as he finished, and she was still slowly shaking her head.

"I knew this was going to happen one day if Ron didn't finish growing up soon. Ginny, please tell me Harry is joking with me." Though Hermione seemed to plead and hope, she knew what the answer would be.

"Sorry, Hermione," Ginny told her. "My brother was being a total git. I fully agree with everything Harry said and did. In fact, he was a lot nicer about it than I would have been had it been just me."

"Are you sure you want to get into the middle of this, Hermione?" Harry asked.

"I don't want to, but you're both my friends and I can't stand you two, or three, being at odds with each other. I don't know what I'll do, but I'll work on him for you." Hermione thought for a moment before she said, "If I may suggest it, try not to set him off by snogging in front of him, at least for a little while. That might help."

"Maybe," Harry said. "But he's going to have to get used to the fact that Ginny is her own person and can make her own decisions. Of all of her brothers, Ron is the only one that acts this way."

"Hmm, what if..." but Hermione was interrupted as the Fat Lady swung out and Ron came in.

Ron took one look at the threesome and with some heat said, "Fraternalizing with the enemy, Hermione?" With a glare at his girlfriend, he stomped up to his dorm room, leaving three stunned friends and a number of whispers from others behind.

"That complete and utter -- berk!" Ginny finally got out. "I swear I'm going to go straighten him out right now. Harry? Don't let any of the other sixth year boys come up until I come back down."

As she stood, Harry asked, "Are you sure you want to tackle this now? Perhaps we should just let him stew for a while."

"No, Harry. If there's one thing I know about Ron, it's that if left to stew in his own stupidity, he'll only do something worse that he and we will regret. Back in a few minutes." She stormed the stairs. Less than a minute later, Neville was coming down and looking back behind him.

"Nev, what's up?" Harry called.

"Ginny just came in the dorm room and motioned me out. I didn't dare argue considering the look that was on her face. Do you know what's going on?" Neville asked.

Harry filled his friend in on the highlights. Neville shook his head in wonder. "What an idiot! I wonder if he'll survive?" Harry and Hermione had been discussing that very question just before Neville arrived.

As soon as Neville had left, Ginny closed the door behind her and turned to her brother. A brother who had fear on his face as his sister faced him down. "All right, Ron, we're going to solve this right now. I'm not leaving until you understand the way things really are, and decide it's good. Now what's your real problem?"

"You're not serious, are you?"

"Very," his sister answered. "What is it, Ron? Are you really bothered by Harry and me being together? Somehow, I don't think so, because you were pretty good about it most of the time when we first started going out. So what is it?"

Ron looked down, so Ginny walked up to him, standing less than a foot in front of him, where he had to look at her.

"What is it, Ron? Think I can't take care of myself or something?" To her surprise, Ron nodded. "What? You've got to be kidding me."

"No," he softly said. "If you want the truth, I was all right until Harry started teaching here. You two weren't really together, and well, I thought it was James for a while and not Harry. Then over Christmas and when he came here, I saw how powerful he really was, I couldn't help but think that he could demand whatever he wanted from you and you had to give it to him."

Ginny could not believe what she had just heard. "What? You don't trust your best friend?" Ron did not answer. Not knowing what else to do, she swiftly brought her right knee up and then shoved Ron backward onto the bed behind him. He curled up in a ball and groaned for a few minutes.

She waited for him to be able to talk again. "Now Ron, please explain to me how I have to do everything Harry tells me?" Her brother had stopped his groaning, but he was still in the fetal position trying to protect himself after the fact. "Harry is damn good at defense work, but you're ignoring the most important part of Harry Potter, his heart. He loves me too much to ever do anything to me that I don't want him to. But just for the sake of argument let's say that Harry had a bad day and really did try something, I think my little demonstration to you should show you that I can take care of myself."

Ginny walked around to the other side of the bed so she could see his face, and use her very limited Legilimency skills. Harry had only started teaching her. "Ron, do you understand that what happens between Harry and I only happens because I want it to?"

Ron nodded, and Ginny could detect no false thoughts.

"Furthermore do you realize that when Charlie was home this last Christmas and was telling us about some of the local witches he had dated, that you thought it was great how many of them he had dated? And you also laughed it up when he hinted at what had happened between them? So tell me Ron, do you see a double standard here?"

Why is it OK for Charlie to have a good time with the girls, but it's wrong for me to have a good time with the boys? Hmm?"

"Because you're a girl and my sister," Ron hoarsely whispered.

Ginny barely avoided slapping him. "And all the witches with Charlie, that you approved of, are girls and are probably someone's sister. You are such a hypocrite Ronald Weasley." He said nothing. "So, are all us girls to be chaste and sit at home waiting for our white knight? Or are we free to do as we wish? Which is it? You can't have it both ways."

Ron looked confused.

"Guess what Ron, I'm growing up. I can make my own decisions." Ginny suddenly had an idea. "Tell me Ron, what are the limits on Hermione? What are you allowed to do with her?"

A blush came to Ron. "We don't do much," he finally got out.

"You're avoiding the question Ron. I didn't ask what you had done, but what are you allowed to do with her. Or, what do you plan to do with her? Hmm?" Ron did not answer. "I know you've snogged, so it's obviously OK for Harry to snog me."

Ron looked like he wanted to disagree, but understood he could not.

"Then there's the broom closets. What did you plan to do in there, Ron? Maybe a little exploration under the robes?" Ron blushed more, and she smiled. "Yeah, I figured you wanted that. What about beyond that, Ron? If Hermione offered to let you go all the way, would you?" Part of Ginny could not believe she was having this conversation with her brother, but she knew this problem had to get worked out.

Ron seemed to struggle with that one, until he finally told her, "I don't know, Ginny. Leave me alone about all this, I just don't know; but I know you shouldn't be doing that."

"Why are you so confused, Ron? Either boys and girls can get frisky, or they both can't. Which is it?" Ron did not answer, so she decided to sit there and stare at him and wait.

"What?" Ron finally asked.

"I'm waiting on the rules to the game. How does this work? I've proved that I can take care of myself and what happens is up to me. So what are you and I allowed to do with our dates?" Ginny stared at him again.

Ron muttered something. Ginny cleared her throat and looked at him. Ron tried again. "I guess you can do what you want."

"Guess Ron? Sorry, there's no guessing here. Where's the line?" she pressed him for an answer.

With a sigh, Ron said, "You can do what you bloody well want. There. Happy?"

Ginny smiled at him. "See? That wasn't so hard. Now, just act that way, and everyone can be happy. Although, what you get to do with Hermione is between you and her, and I do not want to hear about it." She got up from leaning against the bed and started to go, before she thought about something else. "And Ron, sorry about the knee. I wouldn't have done it if you would have been more reasonable," and not so stupid, she thought. "You should not have made up your mind based on one feeling; next time, try to examine the problem from all sides and more logically, like a chess game." She left him to think about that.

When Ginny returned to the common room, Harry asked, "Well?"

"I got his attention and pointed out the illogic of his thoughts. Once I did that, he agreed that I can do whatever I want." Harry smiled and Ginny returned the look, then her smile got bigger as she turned to Hermione. "Of course, that also means that Ron can do whatever he wants too, unless his girlfriend tells him 'no'."

Hermione harrumphed. "I don't think so. This girlfriend has definite feelings on what her boyfriend can and can't do ... after he apologizes for what he said to me."

"A little self-protection isn't all that hard," Ginny explained. "I demonstrated to Ron that I can protect myself, with my knee."

Harry and Neville looked at each other and cringed once they figured out what she meant. Ginny and Hermione both laughed.

Neville looked at Ginny. "Is it safe to go back up?"

"Yeah, sure, though I'd be careful what subjects you discuss, if you talk to him," she cautioned.

"Thanks." Neville left them.

Once it was just the three of them, Harry turned to his good friend. "Hermione, I need a really big favor." He then tantalized her further with, "You might even say it would help the war effort."

"Oh, and what would the favor be?"

"I need you to become an expert on Godric Gryffindor." She was surprised by that. "The other founders don't matter, but I need to know as much about him as we can, specifically any objects that were known to be his, like his sword that I found, what he liked, where he came from, that sort of thing," Harry told her.

"Why Harry? Why the in-depth knowledge on Gryffindor? And what does it have to do with the war?"

Harry spoke even more softly. "It's all a secret Hermione, but let's just say that something from the past may affect the present war. If you can become that kind of expert over the next two weeks, and give me your notes, Ginny and I will use them in ways I am not allowed to tell you."

Hermione looked from Harry to Ginny. "Is he serious?"

"I don't know. What are you on about Harry?" his girlfriend asked.

"You'll find out tomorrow, Ginny. Hermione, will you please help me? You are the best person I know at research. You know the school library better than anyone I know, maybe even better than Madam Pince."

The girl blushed slightly. "I will, if you'll answer me one question, Harry."

"If I can..."

"Why does Ginny get to know more? We've done so many things together in the past." Hermione was not quite hurt, but she did honestly want to know.

Harry knew one appeal that would work with her, and fortunately, it was the truth. "Because the Headmaster wanted the fewest possible number of people to know." She nodded in acceptance, though Harry could tell she was not happy. "I'll tell you what, if what you find us does not help us with our task, I'll speak to the Headmaster about bringing you in so you can more fully help us with other research. How's that?"

"All right, Harry," Hermione agreed. "I'll see what I can find for you. Can I tell Ron about this?"

"Only if you think you can trust him to keep what the research is about a secret. I'll leave that decision up to you," Harry told her. With that conversation done, Harry held out his hand to his girlfriend and led her over to the couch for some quality snuggling time. Besides being fun, it prevented her from asking about tomorrow.

(Sat 1 Mar)

Harry and Ginny went to the Manor a little before eight in the morning, when few others were up that early on a Saturday. They had barely sat down for breakfast when Lupin and Shacklebolt joined them.



"Thanks for coming over guys, I really appreciate it considering how short notice it was," Harry told them as he poured juice for both he and Ginny, while Ginny started serving eggs for the two of them.

"No problem, Harry," Kingsley replied as he sat down and joined Remus in helping himself to the food. "I do appreciate you having the meeting early for me, and for providing breakfast. It's a nice incentive."

"Yeah, well, let's see how nice you think this is. Have any of you every heard of Horcruxes?" Harry asked. Moony looked at him with wide eyes at the mention of the Dark objects, while Kingsley and Ginny just gave him unknowing looks. Harry repeated his conversation with Dumbledore from the day before.

"That's why you asked Hermione to research Gryffindor," Ginny exclaimed.

"Yeah, I thought she could research him in the school library, while we researched here in this library," Harry suggested.

"Good idea," Moony agreed. "Let's finish breakfast and start."

Kingsley shoveled the last of his light breakfast in his mouth, then grabbed a piece of toast to take with him. "Thanks for the update Harry. I'll do some discreet research myself for you. Occasionally I find bookstores and libraries with rare books in them. If I do, I'll see what I can find for you." The Auror left for a half shift at work.

After nearly three hours in the library, the remaining trio thought they had all the books that mentioned Gryffindor in them, at least according to the magical catalogue. The stack to go through was impressive. After a light lunch, the three Flooed to Dumbledore's office.

It was three of them because Ginny made Harry take her. She pointed out, and Moony reluctantly agreed, that it might be good to have one person stand at a distance and watch. That person could either warn if someone was coming, or more importantly, go get help if the others were injured.

Dumbledore did not want to take Ginny either, but her argument and Harry's insistence caused her to be included, though she was required to take and wear Harry's Invisibility Cloak, much to her annoyance.

With a Portkey Dumbledore created, the four found themselves in an old building. One look out the windows showed them to be in London. Dumbledore had the three of them disillusion themselves, since Ginny was already invisible with Harry's cloak. Pulling out a quill, Dumbledore levitated it in front of him, and everyone slowly followed the floating feather to the room the Headmaster remembered meeting an eleven year-old Tom Riddle.

Once they were all inside, the door was locked and all of them became visible again. Ginny stood near the door. Looking around, it was obvious the room was still used, though it appeared that a little girl lived there now.

"How can there be one of those things in here and no one be harmed?" Lupin asked.

"Because it was not meant to be found, and because it was placed among Muggles," the Headmaster explained. He cast several revealing spells, and the wardrobe was the only thing to give off a soft glow. After some inspection and a few more revealing spells, Dumbledore started casting more spells to remove wards on the piece of furniture.

After over fifteen minutes of sweating as he watched nervously, since Harry was sure the little girl would come back, Dumbledore seemed to be satisfied with his work. "There, that should do it."

"Just like that?" Harry asked. "I would have thought Tom would have put a lot more traps on it."

"Oh, there are undoubtedly more traps, but those are the ones I see for now. Miss Weasley, back under the cloak, please?" He put a shield in front of her. "Everyone, draw your wand and get ready. I shall attempt to open the hidden compartment and take the cup, or

whatever is hidden here out. If I can do that, we will Portkey back. Ready?" Everyone seemed to be, so Albus Dumbledore reached in, and moved a small panel in the back of the wardrobe.

As the little wooden panel flipped down and landed with a thump on the inside bottom of the wardrobe, everyone held their breath and glanced around. Nothing seemed to happen. After a few long seconds of nothing, Dumbledore did another revealing spell, and when nothing showed, he reached in and touched the cup handle and pulled it out. Then something happened.

Harry was amazed at the appearance of three Vampires in the room. To the wizards good luck, their sudden appearance put them in the middle of the sunlight coming in the windows, which slowed them down, if not stunned them. That made them easy targets, and the three men easily dispatched them.

Dumbledore hurriedly put the wardrobe back as it was, then pulled out a piece of rope. "Apparently, Tom thought we would do this at night. Hurry, everyone, grab this." When the last hand, which was Ginny's grabbed it, the Headmaster unlocked the room's door, then activated the Portkey. They found themselves in a forest a few seconds later.

"We are not far into the Forbidden Forest, or from Hagrid's hut. Please keep watch while I deal with this," Dumbledore informed and commanded them. Setting the cup on the ground, he started doing a very long spell.

After a full minute, the Headmaster was still working, so Harry turned to his mentor. "Moony? What is he doing?"

"It's a form of an exorcism spell. I've read about it before, but I've never seen it. Keep watch, he's probably got another couple minutes of work," the werewolf explained.

Sure enough, nearly three minutes later, there was a bright flash and then old wizard reached down and picked up the cup. "A beautiful artifact, don't you think? I'll enjoy displaying it once the war is over." With that said, he put it in his robes.

"Oh, Professor, I think you'll want this too." Harry dug into his robes and pulled out a large gold locket on a chain.

Taking it, the Headmaster did a revealing spell. "Yes, this is what we need. Everyone, keep watch again." Another four minutes later, there was another flash of light and another smile on the Headmaster's face. "Excellent Harry. It was very fortunate that you found that artifact and remembered it. That's five down and one to go."

"I'm searching for some information," Harry told him. "I also have convinced Hermione to become an expert on Godric Gryffindor, though all she knows is that it will help me in the war."

"That's a bit more than I would have told her, but not fatal. I also suspect you needed to tell her that because of her curiosity," Dumbledore pondered out loud.

"Yes sir. I told her I wanted her notes in two weeks," Harry told the old man.

"Very good. I'm searching too, so we shall see what we find. I guess we can all go our separate ways. Harry, are you and Miss Weasley coming with me?"

Harry was very surprised the Headmaster was giving him the option. "No sir. I hope you don't mind, but I need to help Moony get back, and I'd like to use the last couple hours of the afternoon to do my research. I believe Ginny will go back with you though, as she has Quidditch practice."

"I shall see you at dinner then. Miss Weasley, shall we?" the Headmaster looked at her.

She moved over the last step between her and Harry and gave him a hug. "Thanks for letting me come, Harry. I'll see you at dinner." While those two started walking back to the castle, Harry Portkeyed Moony and himself back to the Manor.

As Harry resumed his research, he wondered what the Headmaster would say to what Harry had been doing for Ginny. When the Quidditch season had started back up, she had had trouble keeping up with everything. So Harry had started doing the research for her Potions homework. That seemed to be enough to give her time to practice, as she only had to take his notes and use them to write her essays, so they would be in her handwriting.

The other option for her had been to quit the team, but Harry had encouraged her not to. He had told her that she needed to have some fun activity so she would not go crazy doing only training and school work. She had fought him only a little. He wished he could have joined her, as he really missed being on the team.

Deciding he would have to do a little flying later to help fulfill that missing need, he picked up the next book on Godric Gryffindor and started reading.

## Chapter 15: There Be Dragons!

(Sat 15 Mar)

Harry and Ginny were eating lunch at school today. They had only trained for the morning, since Ginny had Quidditch practice that afternoon, as well as some homework for Herbology that was due on Monday.

As Ron was talking to Ginny about their upcoming practice, Hermione looked at Harry and quietly told him, "I have those notes you were asking for a couple weeks ago Harry. Perhaps this afternoon, when these two are practicing, would be a good time to review them?"

"Yeah, that would work. How much do you have?"

"A couple of feet worth," she told him as she stabbed at her salad trying to get the last few leaves onto her fork.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Hmm, that's a little more than I found. We can compare and combine notes to see where it gets me then,"

"You researched it too? I didn't see you in the library."

He smiled at her. "That's because I used a different library. I listed the books I used, so we can also see if we used the same references."

"I'm impressed, Harry," Hermione told him. "I've never seen you do in-depth research like this." She was also a little jealous that he had access to another library that she did not, though she hid that feeling.

"I have great motivation in this case," he admitted.

"Motivation for what?" Ron asked.

Harry looked over at him and wondered exactly what he wanted to say, but he supposed it did not really matter as they were in too public a place for him to say anything private. "Motivation to learn the history of the war; I want to be able to do better." Harry hoped that

was good enough for his friend; apparently it was, as Ron started working on dessert without any more questions.

As they all finished, the foursome started walking towards the tower. Brother and sister still discussing the practice, while Hermione walked with Harry. She had handed over her notes while they were leaving the Great Hall, and Harry was quickly scanning them. He had seen about three-quarters of the information during his research, but Hermione had found some truly interesting things he had not seen before. As they arrived back at the Tower, Harry was skimming the last part and noticed that Hermione had a small map with an area circled. The text beside it said that Godric Gryffindor's home should be in that area, which was not too far from Hogwarts.

"Hermione, how accurate is this guess on where he lived?"

"About as good as anyone can guess, Harry." Hermione continued her explanation with, "I could probably make a better guess, but not with the information I had here. I'd need to use Muggle archeological data, as they are much better at cataloguing sites."

The wheels were turning in Harry's head and he pulled Hermione over to the side of the big room near the door to his room. "If I could get you to a big library, how long would it take you to find out?"

"Depends on the library, but someplace like the main library in London should have most of the information I need. I don't know, three or four hours maybe," she told him. "But that will have to wait until Easter break, as that's the earliest we could get there."

Harry was still thinking it through when Ron and Ginny came down their stairs dressed for practice. Seeing Ginny in her gear gave him an idea -- rather, it confirmed something he was already thinking. "Ginny, Ron, over here." Harry called, and they came over.

"What's up Harry? Don't take too long, we've got practice in half an hour," Ron told him.

"Yeah, you do, but I'm afraid Ginny is not going to make it today. I need her to watch my back."

"Harry, you can't do that. She's our only Seeker," Ron complained.

"Sorry, Ron, this is more important than your practice, and the Seeker doesn't really need to be there to fly formations either" Harry told him. "Ginny, head back up and get into some Muggle clothes. Hermione, you need to get changed too."

"What?" Hermione exclaimed. "Harry, you can't be thinking about doing what I think you're thinking."

Ron looked at his girlfriend in puzzlement, but he skipped that and went on to the important matter at hand. "Harry, I need Ginny at practice. Besides, what would I tell the team when they ask why she got out of practice?"

"Honestly, I'll let you worry about that, Ron. Maybe you should tell them that it's none of their business." A mischievous grin suddenly came over Harry. "Or you could tell them that you said something stupid to Hermione and Ginny is trying to talk her into forgiving you. They might believe that."

Ron slugged him on the shoulder. "Hey! That wasn't nice."

"Sorry, but I really do need these two," Harry told him.

"And what are you going to be doing?" Ron asked.

"This professor is taking these two students on a field trip. I need to do this as soon as possible. Hurry, girls; time is wasting." Harry shooed them up the stairs for them to go change.

"And why can't I go," Ron asked.

"I'm sorry Ron, but I need this to be a minimal number, and if you completely cancelled your practice, that might raise too many questions. I really don't want to take Ginny either, but I need a guard to watch my back. Besides, you really don't want to go."

"Why not?" his redheaded friend asked.



"Because, we're going to a library," Harry said with a grin. His friend looked gobsmacked. "Go on to your practice; I know you'll enjoy it more. If we can find what we need quickly, we'll be back by dinnertime. If not, we'll definitely be back before curfew. If we aren't, you're free to go tell the Headmaster everything. But Ron, please do me, your sister, and your girlfriend, a very big favor and keep all of this to yourself otherwise. I don't anticipate any problems, and I'd prefer the Headmaster didn't know. OK?"

Ron looked at him carefully. "OK, Harry. I'll keep your secret until nine, but not a moment longer."

"Thanks, Ron; that will be good enough. Head on to practice, I'll do everything in my power to protect them both," Harry promised. Ron nodded and left.

A few minutes later, both girls came down. Their dress caused a few eyebrows to go up, but Muggle clothes weren't totally uncommon on a weekend, so they were ignored after a glance by everyone. When they reached Harry, he opened the door to his room and motioned them both in. Harry pulled Ginny's dragon hide coat down and handed it to her, and then put his on. That left Hermione more vulnerable, then he got an idea.

Harry grabbed his dragon hide vest that he wore as James and handed it to Hermione. "Here, put this on. Not as good as our longer coats, but better than nothing." The brunette pulled her jumper off, put the vest on over her undershirt, then put her jumper back on top to hide it. Harry felt a better about them all now.

"Ginny, you're the guard for this trip. It is your duty to always be completely aware of what is going on around us. I'll try to be aware too, but I will be helping Hermione from time to time. Oh, I've got something else too." He went over to the little table beside his bed and grabbed a paperback book, which he handed to Ginny. "You can pretend to read this. While I don't anticipate any problems, use your wands only as a last resort. Ginny, I know you've only gotten a couple of spells to work wandlessly, use those if you must before you draw your wand."

She nodded. "The Fellowship of the Ring? I haven't heard of it."

"It's pretty good for fun reading," Harry told her. "I'm starting to wonder if the author was really a wizard, though."

"How are we getting there, Harry?" Hermione asked.

He smiled at her. "The same way we got there when I rescued you, though you only have to grab my arm tightly this time." That caused her to blush and Ginny to giggle. Harry touched his wand to the Black key and they went to the foyer of Grimmauld Place. Walking into the kitchen, they found people there, something he was hoping would not happen.

"Potter? What are you doing here?" Mad-Eye asked him. He was eyeing the girls too, but he knew who was in charge of the group.

"Mad-Eye, this is a surprise. Mr. and Mrs. Granger, hello. Sorry to interrupt, but we were just passing through. We needed to use the Floo for a school field trip," Harry explained.

"A field trip? To where Potter?" the old Auror asked.

Harry did his best to sound confident and in control. "We need to go to the main Muggle library for some research, that's all I'll say for now. We should only be there a few hours."

"Very well, but if you're not back in four hours, I'll come look for you. Disguises would be in order too," Moody suggested.

"Right, good idea," Harry agreed. With some wand work, Harry and Ginny became light brunettes, while Hermione became a bleach blonde. Harry also aged them all five years. Mrs. Granger gasped at the last change. "Don't worry Mrs. Granger, it's only temporary."

"I want to see you back here by dinnertime, Potter," Mad-Eye growled.

Harry smiled, "We'll try, but we're really not sure how long it will take to find the information we're looking for."

"The main library closes at eight on Saturday's," Mr. Granger volunteered.

"Then we'll be back by eight at the latest," Harry announced. "Come on ladies. To the Leaky Caldron and we'll grab a cab from there."

Twenty minutes later, they were in the Archeology section of the main library in London. They found a nice corner table with no one nearby. Hermione started poring through the books, most of them with lots of pictures and maps. She told Harry that in addition to some facts she was looking for, he was to scan the pictures for anything "Gryffindor'ish".

Ginny decided the paperback book might be good, but she was having a hard time concentrating on it, as she looked up and around with her eyes after every sentence. She had also very carefully cast a ward around the area so they would hear a coughing sound if anyone came too near. Harry had smiled at her when he saw her cast it with her wand under the table.

When Harry's stomach rumbled, he glanced at his watch and noticed it was a little after six, but he didn't stop them. They would work straight through until eight if need be. Neither of the girls complained, so either they did not care or were not hungry.

"Harry, look at this book," Hermione handed him yet another one. "I like what I'm reading about it in some of these other sources."

Opening the book, the first picture he saw had a Gryffindor lion relief carved into the stone wall at the entrance to the castle. He quickly tapped his friend's shoulder and pointed. Hermione smiled. She also handed him two more books. He looked at them; they were obviously different castles, but he found nothing that caught his eye.

At half past seven, Hermione closed her books and handed Harry a map they had photocopied earlier. "There are three possibilities, but this one here," she pointed to the one with a star, "is the one that is probably it. It is also the one that had that lion relief on it, as well."

Harry smiled. "You're absolutely brilliant, Hermione!"

"Do I get to know what this is for now?" she asked.

"Uh, not quite yet. Dumbledore wasn't happy when I told him I had you helping me, but he understood. I promise I will tell you some day." Harry turned to his girlfriend. "Ginny, take down your ward; we need to go."

They walked out of the library. Harry had each girl hold an arm like he was escorting them both. When he saw two large trucks parked on the street, he walked towards them. As no one appeared to be looking their way, he walked the three of them in the gap between them, as if they were going to be crossing the street. Once between them, he Portkeyed the three of them back to Headquarters.

Down in the kitchen, they found Mrs. Granger had been keeping dinner warm for them, and they were grateful. Moody was still there too. "About time Potter, I thought I was going to have to start a search and rescue party."

"Nope, it just took longer to find what we needed than we thought. There was a lot of information to sift through. Nice soup, Mrs. Granger," Harry said.

"Thank you, dear. It was so nice of you to drop in on us like this. The mirror is nice, but you can't give a hug through one," she said with a smile. Hermione rolled her eyes, but she was smiling too.

"Well, technically, this was an unauthorized field trip, so we'd appreciate you not telling anyone," Harry finally admitted.

"Potter! What are you doing saying things like that," the Auror chastised him. "Haven't I told you not to admit to bending the rules when you have a good enough reason? Or was this trip just for fun?"

"No sir. The library is an interesting place, and it was right useful for our studies, but definitely not fun," Harry explained. "Still, all of you need to know that I'd prefer this be kept a secret."

"So, how do you get between here and school?" Mr. Granger asked.

"Magic," Harry said with a smile. "By the way, nice job on the redecorating. It's looking loads nicer."

"Thank you, Harry," Mrs. Granger responded. "I've had a lot of fun so far, and there's more to go. Would you like a tour?"

"Yes, but it will have to be later. It's already a little after eight, and Ron is expecting us before nine, or things will get sticky there," Harry said. "We'll try to make it back for Easter break." The others were done eating, so they got up too.

Harry led them upstairs to a third floor room. "Hopefully Mad-Eye can't see through this many floors," he told her them. "Now, Ginny take her hand and hold on very tight. Hermione, hold onto Ginny. It's going to feel a little weird, but please trust Ginny and me. It will all be over with very quickly. I'd also prefer you to close your eyes, but if you don't, you'll have to guard this secret very carefully. Definitely no telling Ron this, as he'd couldn't hold this one."

Hermione nodded, but kept her eyes open. Curiosity got the better of her.

"Very well," Harry said and transformed into his phoenix form. Hermione gasped, but did not have a chance to say anything, as he flew over Ginny who grabbed onto his tail feathers. The magically lightened load barely went into the air before Harry flashed them to his room in the castle. Putting them on the floor, he transformed back.

"That is amazing!" Hermione finally said. "Now I understand why you two seem to disappear in here for hours. You're not really here, it's just a convenient place to travel where people can't see you." She had a million more questions about it all, if she could only figure out which to ask first.

Harry was concerned. "Hermione, how many people know that? This is important, please be honest."

"I don't know, probably not many. I and Ron do, that might be all. Your coming back in from outside the Tower helps with that, as they think they just missed you going out, but a few others probably have noticed. Also, I don't know if Professor McGonagall knows or not, but I think almost everyone in our house knows Ginny can get in here."

Ginny closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm sorry Harry, I tried."

"Don't worry about it Ginny. So, Hermione, what do people think about that?" Harry had to know. He knew he could not keep everything a secret, but he did not want to get Ginny into trouble or to give her a bad reputation.

"Most people don't care. There's a few like Lavender and Parvati that are starting to wonder what you do in here, but since they also see you not trying to hide your studying and snogging out there, their opinions aren't too bad." Hermione shrugged like she wasn't sure what else to say.

"Damn!" was all Harry said before he walked out into the common room. There, Ron was playing Neville in chess, one of the few people who still would. Harry had finally given up trying to win. He only played Ron now because it was one of the ways Harry spent time with his friend.

"There you are," Ron said. "I was really starting to wonder about you. It's getting close to nine."

"Ah, Harry, why couldn't you have waited a little bit more," Neville good naturedly complained. "I was actually winning for once."

Harry laughed. Turning to Hermione, he gave her a one-armed hug. "Thanks for your help. I'll tell you later how it goes." With that, he grabbed Ginny's hand and walked out of the common room.

"Where's he off to now?" Ron asked.

His girlfriend told him. "I'd guess the Headmaster's office, but I don't know."

Harry handed the Headmaster the map and told him they needed to check out the castle at the starred location. Dumbledore raised an eyebrow at that, but only said next Saturday would probably be best, but that he'd let them know. Harry and Ginny found a few alcoves on the way back, and still managed to walk into the Gryffindor Tower right at curfew time.

(Sat 22 Mar)

It was seven in the morning, and because it was early on a Saturday, no one else was up. Both Harry and Ginny wished they could say they were sleeping too. Instead, they were dressed in their dragon hide coats again and heading towards the Headmaster's office. The Headmaster had told them to be there at seven for a quick breakfast before they spent all day searching a castle. Ron was not pleased to have Ginny miss another practice, but she had made the other two that week.

In the office, the two teens found Dumbledore and Lupin just sitting down to eat. The teens each grabbed a plate of food too. Dumbledore filled them in while they ate.

"Remus and I have been to the castle and looked around a few evenings this week. It is quite large, maybe a quarter of the size of Hogwarts. There is enough magical residue that I believe it is Godric Gryffindor's castle; so good job, Harry. You should tell Miss Granger good job, too. Now, we just need to search it thoroughly to see if we can find a Horcrux there. As I mentioned, there is residual magic still there, so by having us all do the revealing spell and investigating whatever shows up, we should get done that much faster."

"Do you plan to have us split up into teams?" Harry asked.

"No. I'd like us to stay together. As you saw at the orphanage, the Horcrux itself will not be found with the reveling spell, but the wards and other guarding spells will show. By having us all in the same room, or at least in the same area, then we can help each other. That worked well for Remus and me, so I believe it will be good for the four

of us too. We'll continue to search the first floor, then go up one floor at a time, with the dungeons last."

"Will we run into anyone else?" Ginny asked.

"Good question; fortunately, that will be most unlikely. To Muggles, it looks like nothing more than pile of rocks, a castle so old there's nothing of value there. Alas, there is the possibility of a tourist or someone coming along, so we should always keep an open ear," the Headmaster advised.

They finished breakfast and used a Portkey the Headmaster created. Harry recognized the entrance from the picture in the book from the library, but the rest of the castle was in far better shape than the rubble in the pictures. They walked across the moat bridge and into the castle. It was obvious that no one lived there now, and that wild animals made their home there from time to time.

After Dumbledore showed Harry and Ginny what rooms he and Remus had already examined, the group continued the search with the next hallway of rooms. In some ways, it went very fast with four people. In other ways, it was tedious and slow, as you never knew what would show up as magical with the revealing spell. The first such item Harry found was the predecessor to the Ever-Filling-Teapot.

By lunchtime, they had completed nearly half of the first floor. Dumbledore was pleased with their progress. Harry was not, but he kept his complaint to himself; he really wanted to get this search over with. If the last Horcrux was not here, or if they could not find it here, he was not sure what they would do next.

Not long after lunch, they came to the Great Hall of the castle. It was a large room with one wall that was completely made of windows. Other than a number of broken and rotting tables and benches, they found a throne on a raised dais, three steps high. As they checked out the room, Harry kept getting the feeling that he should sit on the throne. It would be cool, as it would show him what it would be like to be a king, at least for a few seconds.



Walking up to the throne, the feeling got stronger. Harry did not see anything wrong, just a nice throne that had been overlaid with gold and silver, though it was worn through to the iron underneath in a few places on the armrests. It probably had had a nice seat covering at one time, but that was long rotted away.

As Harry was about to sit on it, Moony came over. "Harry? What are you doing?"

"I thought I'd sit on it for a few seconds. You know, see what it was like to be a king on a throne sort of thing," Harry replied.

"Did the revealing spell come up clean on it?" Moony asked.

"Uh, don't know, I didn't bother; I just felt like checking out the view from up here."

That sounded just strange enough, that Moony did the revealing spell himself. He was surprised by how much magic showed from around the throne. He leaped up the steps and shouted, "No! Don't sit!" as Harry touched the chair arms and started to sit down. Harry paused just long enough, that Moony made it up there and grabbed the boy's arm and threw him to the ground.

The other three looked at Harry as he lay crouched on the floor and looked up at Moony and the throne. As he did so, a beam of light that looked like a spell shot out from under the throne towards Harry. Fortunately, his arm was near his head, so he moved it front of him so the beam hit his arm, and the coat on his arm.

Harry was not there long as Ginny had already started a spell, "Accio Harry!" and her boyfriend flew out of the beam of light and to her. Trying to catch him knocked her over, and knocked the breath out of her, but she was otherwise all right. They both slowly stood, but Ginny was the first to speak, though in halting gasps. "You all right, Harry?"

"Yeah, fine. Thanks, Ginny. You OK, too?"

"Yeah, never better now that you're safe."

"What was that?" Harry asked to one of the adults. Dumbledore had started walking over to him, as had Lupin, after he had jumped off the dais.

"I'm afraid I don't know, Harry. It could have been almost anything." He waved his wand over Harry several times. "I don't detect any problems, so you should be all right. I'm glad you are wearing that coat, and nice reaction, Miss Weasley."

Whatever Ginny was about to say was drowned out by a roar and breaking glass as a Chinese Fireball dragon flew in through the wall of many windows. The foursome scattered. "Go for its eyes," Dumbledore yelled. Harry wished he had his broom.

The fighting was fierce for several minutes, with most spells bouncing off the dragon, and the few that actually had an effect, seemed to just make the dragon madder. Dumbledore had stepped forward to get a better shot, when Harry saw the dragon swing his tail towards the old man. Harry could tell Dumbledore had not seen the tail, so with a quick flick, he summoned Dumbledore to him and caught him when the old man arrived.

"Thank you Harry. That was good timing after my poor judgment."

"I wish I had Gryffindor's sword now. It was very useful against the Basilisk," Harry mentioned.

"Excellent idea, Harry. Guard me for a moment." The old man seemed to become lost in thought. Harry threw up a shield to block the fire the dragon was breathing in his direction. Moony and Ginny seemed to be barely holding their own.

Suddenly, Fawkes appeared and a long thin piece of metal clanged on the floor in front of Harry. He recognized it immediately. Grabbing the sword with his left hand, he picked it up. "Fawkes, go after the dragon's eyes. Blind it just like you did the Basilisk we fought," Harry told the bird, and he hoped the bird minded him.

Whether he wanted to do as Harry asked or whether Dumbledore reinforced the request, Fawkes did indeed fly up and start going after the dragon's eyes. Harry stepped forward with the sword held in front of him. When the dragon rose up on his haunches to get the phoenix, Harry saw the scales on the softer underbelly move apart slightly, so he took his chance and ran. As he got to the dragon, he shoved the sword up into the dragon between two of the scales.

The magically sharp sword easily went into the dragon; and in fact, it stayed there and Harry had to let go of it as he could not pull it out. The dragon roared in pain, the phoenix forgotten. The large magical reptile tried to dislodge the sword, but instead started falling forward.

Harry realized he could never run away in time. There was no way he could do a levitation spell on the dragon; it was far too heavy for him, and probably for all four of them combined. As the thought of him being crushed came to mind, so did the thought that this was like dueling practice when he had worked out with six dueling dummies and he had had to come up with a new fighting strategy.

Ginny saw Harry stab the dragon, and saw it start to flop forward. It was obvious Harry was not going to get out from under it in time. She tried to shorten the spell to just "Accio!" and hoped that her thinking of Harry was good enough to bring him in time, but she saw the dragon flop down, its left wing blocking her sight just before the massive dragon body crushed her boyfriend. The last she saw of him, he was looking right at her. When he did not come flying at her, even though it was too late, she screamed, "HARRY!" and started to run towards him.

Before she completed her first step, she felt strong arms go around her middle and pull her backwards. As she could see Dumbledore and Lupin in front of her, she started to throw a spell over her shoulder and hope for the best, when she heard, "Gin, it's OK." That was her favorite voice.

Instead of hexing the person that had grabbed her, she turned around kissed him instead. It was the best kiss she had ever had, because she had been sure she was not going to get any from him ever again.

As they broke, she hugged him tightly as if never wanting to let go, and asked, "Harry, how did you get away?"

To her surprise, he chuckled. "It was just like dueling practice. I did a short-distance snap Apparation, except I didn't have to keep fighting."

Tears were starting to stream down her face. "Oh Harry, I am so glad you did that. I thought I had lost you."

Harry continued to hold her as he looked over her shoulder. Dumbledore and Lupin were carefully watching the dragon, but there was not much to do as it was now lying still, obviously now dead. "I wished I could take its hide home with us," Harry said.

The Headmaster looked at him with a twinkle in his eye. "I was thinking about all the uses of dragon's blood. I have an idea, but let's get the Horcrux first. With a guardian like that, there must be one here." He pulled out some parchment and a quill to write a short message. Fawkes left with the note.

It took a little over twenty minutes before Dumbledore pulled out a small crown, or more actually a circlet that had been stuck underneath the seat of the throne. He handed it to Lupin, along with a Portkey. "Here, this will take you to the clearing we used last time. I'll join you in a few minutes."

They waited nearly ten minutes before Dumbledore arrived. Again, four minutes later, there was a flash of light. Dumbledore smiled and put the circlet into an inner pocket in his robes. "Interesting that Gryffindor's object was a crown."

"I suppose, but if you read the notes I left you, you should have seen that Gryffindor was the local duke for the area before he helped to found Hogwarts. In fact, the land for Hogwarts was donated by him as it was at the edge of what he managed for the king of that time," Harry recited.

"Yes, you are correct. I had forgotten. Very well. I have to return back to retrieve a few things, and to take some people back when they are

done. I believe you will get a full hide after all Harry," Dumbledore told him.

"I'd like to return if I may. I'd like to see what happens, as well as retrieve the sword. It's saved my life twice now."

"Me too," Ginny added.

"I'm afraid I must be going," Lupin told them. "I can make my way back, so you don't have to worry about me."

"Very well. Three is easy enough for Fawkes. Everyone come over and hold hands." Fawkes had been sitting in a nearby tree. Harry grabbed the Headmaster's hand and Ginny's hand. The Headmaster grabbed Fawkes' tail feathers, and a few seconds later, they had flashed back to the Great Hall in Gryffindor's castle.

The arrival of the phoenix with his three passengers garnered the attention of the crew of four who were working on the dragon. Already, there were a number of small kegs and crates around the edge of the room, and the huge dragon body looked half deflated. When the dragon team looked up at the new arrivals, Ginny immediately recognized one of them.

"Charlie!" she shouted and ran to her brother.

"Ginny?" he questioned. "Ginny!" He rushed over to her and grabbed her in a hug. "You look so grown up dressed like that, I had trouble recognizing you."

"It's me. What are you doing here?" she wondered.

"Well, Professor Dumbledore came and said there was a dead dragon that had salvageable parts. He worked a deal with my manager, our labor for all of the meat and some of the blood. We'll make quite a bit on it, though he said he reserved the rest, including all of the hide. However, he didn't say how it died. Do you know?" her brother asked.

Ginny smiled. "Oh yeah, Harry killed it," she said with pride.

"All alone?"

Harry quickly stepped up and joined them. "I did have some help."

Ginny snorted. "Right, all we did was distract the dragon. Harry did the hard work of actually killing it."

"Hey!" Harry protested. "Distracting it was very important, else I couldn't have gotten close enough to stab it. Oh, that reminds me. Charlie, be very careful when you get to the chest area. There's a magically sharp sword in there. That's why I returned, I want the sword back. Well, and the hide; I have a few thoughts on what to do with that."

Charlie looked very amazed. "You killed that dragon with only a sword? Are you crazy? That's bloody dangerous." Harry just smiled at him. The irony of a dragon handler saying that was not lost on Harry. Charlie shook his head with chagrin. "Well, Harry, if you can kill a dragon with a sword, you deserve the hide. Give us a couple of hours or so and you'll have your prize. If you shrink it down, you should be able to get it back, though it will still be pretty large and bulky." The red-haired man returned to work.

Harry conjured up a small couch, and he and Ginny snuggled up on it to watch the men work, and to wait for their prizes. Harry decided he would take the hide to the man in Diagon Alley tomorrow who sold him his coat and see about getting some custom work done. Ginny could help him get all the proper measurements of his friends. He'd have a coat and a pair of boots made for himself, Ginny, Ron, Hermione, and probably Neville too. There should easily be enough for six vests too, a "thank you" for each of his friends that came with him to the Department of Mysteries.

A little before midnight, Fawkes took Harry, Ginny, the sword, and a trussed and shrunken dragon hide back to Hagrid's hut. Professor Dumbledore told him he could leave the hide there overnight.

As the two teens made their way back to Gryffindor Tower, they came across Filch. "Ha! Got the two of you this time. You just wait until you

see what's going to happen to you for being out so late," he told them with glee.

Harry had never pulled any special favors before, but now seemed like a good time. "Filch," he said tiredly, "have you forgotten that I am a professor? Curfew rules do not apply to professors, or to students being escorted by a professor. So leave us alone, we're tired and trying to go to bed." Harry turned them around and walked away from the man.

"Potter! You can't get away from me that easily," the squib told him and started walking after the teens.

With a heavy sigh, Harry turned around and pulled his wand out. "Filch, have you forgotten who can do magic and who can't? If you want to report me, fine, I'm sure the Headmaster would be happy to entertain any report about us being out late. But I am warning you, if you keep coming after us, I will stick you to the floor where you stand, and you won't be moving until some other professor comes along and finds you." The old squib caretaker stopped and stared at Harry, unsure what to do. Harry turned and grabbed Ginny's hand to walk on. No footsteps followed them.

Back in the tower, the couple found Ron and Hermione sleeping together on the couch. The two six years had obviously been trying to wait up for their friends. Harry and Ginny both found that incredibly funny and only barely contained themselves enough not to wake their friends up by laughing. The dragon slayers planned to tease their two friends mercilessly about sleeping together. After a very tired good-night kiss, Harry and Ginny parted for a well deserved rest.

The next day, Harry found out from the Headmaster that he was not in trouble for being out late, and Charlie and his co-workers had been Obliviated as to where the castle was, and that Harry and Ginny had been there or done anything.

When Harry saw Hermione, he pulled her into a big hug and whispered in her ear, "This is for a job well done, something even Dumbledore hadn't been able to do."

She beamed. "Can I know now?" she whispered back.

Harry sighed. "I'm sorry, but I can't let myself put you in danger. Know that I'll tell you everything later and that you've helped in a way that probably no one else could have."

"Thanks, Harry. I appreciate you telling me that. You're frustrating when you go all security-conscious on me, but I really do understand."

Harry was very pleased to have destroyed the final Horcrux. Now, all he had to do was the final deed, if he could find Voldemort.  
(Fri 28 Mar)

"STOP!" Harry yelled, and Ginny relaxed her arm and let her wand fall to her side. Harry was getting frustrated at the duel this afternoon. He had recently started having her duel him instead of Moony or the practice dummies all the time. He wanted to push her to the next level. "Ginny, I've taught you everything you need to know to pass your NEWT for Defense, so you should be doing better," he admonished her.

"Harry, I'm never going to be as good as you, you know more," she said, also with frustration in her voice.

"Ginny, I'm not talking about beating me. Yes, I'd like to see you be that good, and the things we'll work on the rest of the year should help with that as we go beyond NEWT level. But I'm talking about right now, with what you know right this minute. Treat this like your final exam. You should be doing better, but you're holding back."

"I am not!"

"You are too! I've seen you fight against the dummies better than this," he told her with some forcefulness. Taking a deep breath, he went back to a calmer voice. "Take a few seconds to clear your mind, and let's try again. Watch how I'm fighting and take advantage of what you see. There's a lesson here, too."



Ginny was angry now. She took a few seconds and envisioned herself as a perfect fighting machine, one that was about to show Harry just how wrong he was. Getting into her fighting stance and concentrating on what she was about to do, as calmly as she could, she said, "Ready."

Harry got ready himself, then said, "Start when you want."

It was easy to tell that Harry was leaning slightly to his left, so she went into motion to cast a spell to his right side to encourage him to go with his lean. A quick tripping jinx was shot, then she cast a Bludgeoning spell to his left in anticipation. A Stunner was coming at her, so she ducked right and rolled. As she came back up, she saw Harry flying backwards as he had not put up a shield. Unlike his usual manner, he did not get back up. He stayed down and moaned, only his right side was moving. Thinking it might be a trick, she stayed where she was, ready but not firing.

After nearly fifteen seconds of that, Ginny started to get worried for real, especially when she noticed that he had dropped his wand. "Harry?" She started walking toward him. Moans were still the only sound he was making. "Harry?" She jogged the last half of the distance to him and dropped to the floor beside her. "Harry?!"

His eyes were fluttering and seemed to be trying to roll into the back of his head. Now she was ready to panic. Harry had shown her the basic medical spells, and Remus was slowly teaching her the more advanced ones. She quickly did a diagnostic spell on him and did not like what she saw. The damage was beyond what she thought Remus, who was in the library, could take care of; she needed professional help.

Knowing it was the fastest way to get help, she hoped she would not hurt him worst by moving him. "Dobby!" she yelled.

The little elf popped in. "Yes, Mistress Ginny."

"Dobby, Harry is hurt and I've got to take him to the school nurse." The elf's eyes grew big. "Can you please bring the Manor key from his bedroom? Bring his entire robes if you can't carry it. And hurry!"

"Yes, Mistress Ginny." The elf popped out and was back in about five seconds with Harry's school robes.

Reaching into the pocket of the robes, she took a chance and grabbed the key to pull it out. She did not know why she could now touch it now when she was originally told she should not be able to, but she was glad she could. Grabbing his wand to stick in her pocket and his right hand to take him with her, she touched her wand to the key and a few seconds later, they were in Harry's room. Harry screamed once in pain before he fell unconscious.

With a Mobilicorpus, she moved Harry to the door of his room. Opening it, she moved him out and closed the door behind her. Hermione and Ron were at a nearby table studying, as were a small number of other students who had already finished classes for the day.

"What happened, Ginny?" Hermione was the first to notice and was concerned.

"Training accident. I've got to get him to Madam Pomfrey quickly. Will you start opening doors in front of me, quickly?" Ginny was barely holding her panic in.

Hermione got up and ran for the portrait hole so that would swing aside. Ginny moved Harry as fast as she could. Once out of the hole, she started jogging towards the Hospital Wing. Hermione and Ron were hard pressed to keep up with her after they were half way there. Puffing from the exertion, Ron barely got to the double doors of the Infirmary before Ginny did. She levitated Harry to a bed as she yelled, "Madam Pomfrey?!"

The nurse came running out of her office. "What is it child?" Seeing Harry on the bed, she ran over to him. "What happened?"

"Training accident. He took a Bludgeoning spell to his left shoulder. He also hit his head on the floor when he landed. He's got a dislocated shoulder and a broken collar bone, as well as a few broken ribs. Some of his internal organs seem a little off, like they're bruised

or something. I'm not sure about his head, but he's probably got a concussion too." Ginny rattled off, tears starting to come to her eyes as she realized what she had done to Harry just to prove herself.

A few diagnostic spells later, the nurse turned to the girl. "A reasonably accurate diagnosis. Don't worry, Miss Weasley, I'll get him fixed up. Why don't you sit down there for a few minutes and get your breath back, then you can go change into your school clothes."

Ginny looked down and saw that she was still in her workout clothes of shorts and an exercise top. She was showing some stomach and plenty of leg. Of course, Harry was in a loose T-shirt and shorts too. Perhaps that was why Ron was giving her looks, though he had not said anything.

The nurse started healing Harry. While she was doing that, Professors Dumbledore and McGonagall walked into the Infirmary. They had obviously been told about Harry's accident from some of the other students who had seen them.

"How is he, Poppy?" the Headmaster asked.

Waving her wand around Harry's head, she answered, "I just fixed a mild concussion, and he's got some broken bones. Nothing overly serious since Miss Weasley brought him here quickly. If you're lucky, you'll be able to talk to him in a few minutes, although I won't let you do that for long. He's going to need sleep to recover." She continued working on the boy.

Professor McGonagall looked at the girl. "Miss Weasley, can you please tell us what happened, and why you two are dressed like -- that." The extra stern expression on her face indicated her disapproval of their dress.

"Well," Ginny was not sure how to answer this without giving too much away. "These are our exercise clothes. We wear them because it's easier to exercise and run in them than in normal clothes. We also practice dueling in them sometimes when we think we'll be running around a lot."

"You mean you dress like this everyday?" The stern woman asked.

"Most days." When her Head of House looked like she was about to object again, Ginny added, "You trying running three miles in your robes and whatever shoes you normally wear, and I'll bet you would find you prefer exercise clothes and trainers too -- Professor."

"Miss Weasley," the Headmaster interrupted. "As interesting as that is, would you please tell us what happened?"

"Yes sir. We were dueling for practice. Harry said I wasn't doing my best and I should think of this like my final exams. I got angry, and well, in the next duel I anticipated his movements a bit too well and hit him with a Bludgeoning hex on the left shoulder and chest. I think he got the concussion when he hit his head on the floor when he fell."

All other questions and answers were suspended when the nurse pulled Harry's shoulder back into place, and the pain brought him back into consciousness with a yell. In a commanding voice, the nurse told him, "Hold still, Mr. Potter. I need to fix your broken collar bone."

Seeing everyone around him, he had to ask, "What happened?"

"I'm sorry Harry," tears were starting to slowly leak out of Ginny's eyes as she had tell her boyfriend what she had done. "I tried to do better like you wanted me to, and I, well, I guess I anticipated you too well."

"See, I told you could do it better. Reading body language and anticipating was what I was trying to teach you, though I would have preferred you had used a slightly less damaging spell," Harry told her with a smile in his voice.

Ginny could not decide whether to be happy she had done the right thing, or mad at him for not telling her what he was doing and letting her hurt him.

"There -- all done, Mr. Potter," the nurse told him. "Some good healing rest with a sleeping potion and you can leave tomorrow afternoon."

"Sleep here?" Harry asked incredulously. "I don't think so, it's not safe enough."

"What do you mean not safe enough?" the nurse asked indignantly. "You've spent plenty of nights here in the past."

"Do you plan to lock those doors so only the people in this room can get in here while I'm asleep?" Harry asked very matter-of-factly.

"Of course not," the nurse replied. "There are others in this castle who may need my services."

Harry moved his left arm around. "You did a very nice job fixing me up, but I'm afraid there are too many people who can get in here. After all, we've already had a Death Eater professor and a Death Eater student here this year. Who's to say there aren't more?"

Everyone looked at him like he had lost it, everyone except for Ginny. She understood, but she also did not know how to help him.

"Well, I'm sorry Mr. Potter, but you need to be watched over for a day. Concussions are not to be trifled with," the nurse told him.

"As if you could keep me here," Harry retorted. All three adults looked at him with various levels of shock at his rebellion. "Ginny, how did you get me back to the castle?"

"I, ah, used your Family key, Harry," she told him softly. When he held out his hand, she put it and his wand in his hand. She now knew what he was going to do, and she was having to work hard at containing herself. The nurse's reaction should be priceless.

"Madam Pomfrey," Harry told her. "I will rest for the next day as you request, but it will be in my room in Gryffindor Tower as I feel safe there. You may check on me there, if you so desire."

"You are not leaving Mr. Potter," the nurse told him forcefully.

"And if you have potions for me, you may give them to Ginny. I will accept them only from her or yourself." With that said, Harry touched his wand to his Manor key, and left the hospital wing.

"Of all the nerve! He can't do that!" the nurse exclaimed.

"I think he just did," Ginny simply said. "If you will give me his potions, I'll take them to him," she offered. The nurse glared at her. "Or not, if simple rest is all he needs."

"Wait here!" the nurse commanded and spun around for her office.

Ginny looked around. Ron had a most amused look on his face, while Hermione seemed to be torn between giggling and surprise that Harry would disobey the nurse, and wondering how he had disappeared. Professor McGonagall looked shocked by his behavior, and the Headmaster was pursing his lips as he considered what had happened, though the twinkle was back in his eyes.

When the nurse came back, she handed three phials to Ginny and gave her instructions. As Ginny left, the Headmaster said, "Perhaps I should come talk to Professor Potter too. I must have forgotten to explain a school policy or two." Going out the door, Ginny noticed that everyone but Madam Pomfrey was following her.

Back up in the Tower, Ginny stopped at Harry's door, and playing her part, looked to her Head of House. "Professor McGonagall, would you be so kind to open the door so Harry will stay in bed?"

The woman silently stepped forward and knocked on the door before she opened it. "Come in," they heard through the cracked door. They all went in. Harry was lying under his covers in bed.

"Ah, so that's what one looks like," the Headmaster said as he saw the little pedestal with Ginny's pictures on it. "I've heard about them, but never seen one personally. Now I understand Harry, this confirms and explains much to me."

Harry had not liked letting that secret out, but he would not sleep in an unprotected area. Besides, the Headmaster already knew he had access to Potter Manor, so the Manor key was only a little bit more than that; and Harry had suspected that the Headmaster had suspected he had a key too as he had talked about "old magic". As long as the Headmaster did not try to prevent him from using it, Harry foresaw no real problems.

"Explains what?" McGonagall asked. Hermione and Ron looked very interested as well.

"It explains how Harry got here, as well as where he and Miss Weasley have been training. It is very old magic, originating from before the existence of the Ministry of Magic." Dumbledore saw he had an interested audience, so he continued. "The oldest of the Wizarding families had a number of secrets, some of which have been lost in time. One of those lost secrets is how to make a 'Family Portkey'. Harry obviously has one from the Potter family. Would you be willing to show us, Harry?"

Harry looked at the Headmaster for a few seconds, then shrugged. Reaching in under his bed covers, he pulled out the Potter key and held it up. Everyone looked carefully.

As Hermione started to reach out for it, the Headmaster spoke up again. "No, Miss Granger! Touch that at your own peril. As I understand, being a friend will only give you a shock you won't forget for a long time. If a foe were to touch it, it might mean death for that person."

"But Ginny touched it without any problems?" Hermione countered.

The old man smiled very broadly. "Yes, I noticed that. Alas, that is something that only Harry can fully understand and explain." Harry looked perplexed at that statement, but the Headmaster did not let the conversation stop there. "That key does a number of things, but as we just saw a few minutes ago, it will take a family member from anywhere to his home. As the magic is so old and little understood, you won't find any wards, spells, or anything else that can stop it from working. I had heard, but never seen, that there was a secondary

place or marker the key would take a family member. This pedestal here," the old man pointed at Harry's, "is such a marker."

"Actually," Harry said, "the key will always take me home, unless I'm already home, then it will bring me to the pedestal."

Dumbledore nodded. "Thank you Harry, that clears it up nicely. May I assume you found the pedestal in your family's Gringotts vault?"

"Yes, and when I finish with Hogwarts, it will go back there. But it's too convenient not to use while I'm here," Harry admitted.

"So you can go home any time you want?" Hermione asked. Harry nodded. "So that's why you appear to spend so much time in here. You're not really here, but at your home." Hermione looked like she had just solved the meaning of life.

Harry sighed. "Since I'm admitting so much, yes. I have resources there that don't exist here at school. I need and use them because no matter what I do, Voldemort and his lackeys keep coming after me."

"Do you mean you've been leaving the school grounds?" Professor McGonagall asked. She was looking at him as if he had just grown a second head.

"Yes, Professor. I realize I'm stretching my authority as a professor..."

"That's putting it mildly," she interrupted.

Harry continued, "But you and the Headmaster agreed during my interview that I could train Ginny my way, as long as she passed her OWLs. Since I know I stretched what you considered to be normal school policy, I will consent to allowing her to be tested at the beginning of May, if you think it necessary. I still consider it a waste of time to test her along the way; but I will allow it if it will make people happy to see that she really has learned Charms and Transfiguration, as well as Defense." A glance at Ginny caused him to add, "And as long as Ginny agrees; it is her time, too."



The transfiguration teacher looked at them, then pulled her hat off and held it in her hand. "Miss Weasley? Will you please change this hat into a small gray mouse with white paws, a black tail, and a brown nose?" Ginny pulled out her wand and did so. "Now into a spider?" Ron edged backward slightly as Ginny did that. "A teacup? A needle? An owl? And back to my hat, please?" McGonagall put her hat back on at the end.

"Miss Weasley, please conjure a table and tea set for four," McGonagall continued. Ginny used three spells instead of the standard five. "Make the spoons play leapfrog please? Now Vanish them all in one spell." As Ginny did that, McGonagall turned to Harry. "I don't see any need for further testing before her OWLs. Congratulations, Mr. Potter. As unorthodox as your methods appear to be, they do work, at least for you and Miss Weasley."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry acknowledged. "We both appreciate you making the the test quick."

"I believe we should go and let Harry rest," the Headmaster said. "Although, if Miss Weasley is to play nurse, perhaps I should add her to the door's access list." He turned to work on the door, and Harry and Ginny looked at each other and smiled. The Headmaster looked back at Harry. "I see that Miss Weasley is already on the access list." Professor McGonagall glared at Harry.

"Yes, well, it is useful as she keeps her dragon hide coat in here, so in an emergency, she can retrieve it quickly," Harry explained, before he could not hold it any longer and started grinning. "And competent Defense teachers can figure out wards."

The Headmaster surprised everyone by chuckling. "Well, Minerva, I believe our business is done here, and Harry needs his rest. Would you join me for some tea and conversation?" The Deputy Headmistress left with the Headmaster.

"Ginny, I'm sorry I'll have to miss the Quidditch game tomorrow, but at least Gryffindor isn't playing." Harry reached out and grabbed her hand.

"That's OK, Harry. Maybe I'll stay here with you. I could use the extra time to catch up on some homework," she told him.

"Ginny!" Ron looked aghast at his little sister. "We need to scout Hufflepuff."

"No, Ron; our chasers and you need to scout Hufflepuff. Their Seeker isn't very good, but their Chasers played very well in the first game. Either I can catch the Golden Snitch or I can't. I've discovered that some things are more important than Quidditch, like my boyfriend and my schoolwork."

Ron started to argue, "But Ginny..."

"No, Ron; I understand my priorities now. I love Quidditch too, but it's about number four or five on my list of important things. I can drop playing Quidditch and still be happy," Ginny told him. Ron looked like she had turned into a spider, while Hermione had a look of admiration on her face. In fact, Ron was so taken aback, he stopped arguing.

"We should go, too," Hermione said, "but I have one question first. Harry, do you know why Ginny can touch your Family key without getting hurt?" All eyes looked to him waiting on his answer.

Harry could not look at any of them however; he closed his eyes and leaned back against his pillow. "I, uh, I need to think about that. Ginny? Would you stay for a little bit, until I get to sleep?"

"Sure, Harry. I have your potions from Madam Pomfrey." She nodded at the door and Hermione took the hint, and dragged Ron after her. Ginny gave Harry his potions, which he took without complaint.

"Ginny, please sit with me for a few minutes." He patted the bed beside him. When she joined him, he reached up and pulled her to him so she rested her head on his chest. Gently stroking her arm, he whispered, "This is how it should be, just you and me. I love you Ginny..."

The stroking stopped as his breathing became shallow and slow. Ginny lay against him pondering Hermione's last question,

Dumbledore's explanation, and Harry's last comment. She felt like she should know the answer to the question, but somehow, it was eluding her grasp.

Finally giving up, she got up and grabbed one of Harry's school robes to cover her workout clothes, and went up to her dorm room to shower and change for dinner. She did have a lot of revising to do for her upcoming OWLs. Knowing Harry would be sleeping for quite some time, she thought she would join Hermione, as her friend would help her keep on track.

## Chapter 16: Too Much Fun

(Sat 12 Apr)

It was a typical Saturday in many ways. Harry and Ginny had started out with their morning exercises and then breakfast. On the other hand, it was becoming a very nice spring day, and Harry thought a little fun might be good for both of them so they did not burn out. Therefore, he declared the rest of the morning would be spent at the pool, which had a few warming charms on it to make it more comfortable. Ginny grinned at him and took off running to her room to change. Harry laughed and slowly walked to his room.

As Ginny went through her drawer to find her swimsuit, she found her "extra" suit that she had slipped into the pile when Harry had taken her shopping. Her devious mind decided now was the time prank Harry back for the picture he had owed her at school. Perhaps this was not the perfect payback, but it would be a good start. She put on that special swimsuit, as well as a large T-shirt, which covered everything, grabbed a towel, and ran downstairs. She had beaten Harry here, but she needed still more time.

Standing at the door, she visualized the pool and attempted something she had only done once before: wandless Apparation. Willing her magic to her hands, she carefully thought about her destination, and very carefully, she touched her hands together. As she finished blinking, she realized she had traveled nearly a hundred yards in less than a second. Smiling to herself, she carefully and wandlessly conjured up a floating mattress with a back so she could sit up, like the one Harry had created for her last time they had gone swimming. Stripping off her long T-shirt, she got on the air mattress as it floated in the water. The water was cooler than she expected, but she considered that would just add to her prank. Lastly, she turned the mattress around in the water so her back was to the house. She did not want Harry to see her until he got to the edge of the pool.

A few minutes later, she heard Harry calling to her. "Hey, is that you already in the pool?"

"Yeah," she called back. "Who did you expect, Celestina Warbeck?" She laughed and heard him laughing too, until his footsteps were at the side of the pool. She turned the mattress around to face him as he walked around her. Harry started to choke on his laugh as he saw Ginny lying on the air mattress as pretty as you please. It took Harry several long seconds to start breathing again as he took in all of Ginny, and it was truly almost all of her. He did not think bathing suits could come that small and still cover everything. The tiny black bikini was something else.

"G-G-G-Ginny?"

"Hi Harry," she said in a seductive drawl. "Like what you see? I suppose it's not a photograph like you sent me, but, uh, isn't the real thing better?" She blew him a kiss and paddled the water a couple of times to move herself back away from him. He still had not moved. She began to wonder if something had fallen out of her suit, but there was no easy way to check and still maintain her "look" as appearances were everything in this prank.

Harry looked at her very carefully. He followed her every curve with his eyes, and most of the curves were not covered up. He supposed, in a purely academic way, that Ginny was not perfect, but at this moment, he could not find a thing about the way that she looked to complain about. Finally, her words clicked in his brain. Yes, he did like what he saw, and he wanted her.

Ginny saw Harry finally drop his towel where he was standing. He stripped off his T-shirt and dove in the water. She had expected him to do that, and to come up beside her air mattress. What she had not expected was for Harry to come up under the mattress and tip her over. Though the water was not deep where she was, she floundered for the first few seconds. Strong hands and arms grabbed her and steadied her against a warm body. Before she had realized what was happening, she found herself being kissed, and kissed hard.

He had pulled her against him as he realized she hadn't expected to be in the water. There was something about saving her that attracted him. She was right there, so he kissed her, and kept on kissing her. She felt good underneath his hands, hard muscle underneath soft

skin, and so much skin. He felt her legs go around his waist and her arms go around his neck and head. She was kissing him as much as he was kissing her. He felt their chests and stomachs touching. It was all driving him wild as he wanted her more. He felt a wild need for her.

As Ginny felt his wonderfully strong hands continue to roam all over her back and bum, she suddenly realized what was about to happen, and she could not let that happen as she was not on the potion. He felt so wonderful, but this was definitely the wrong time. As much as she did not want to, she broke off the kiss, and with her hands on his shoulders, and feet on his thighs, she pushed back hard from him. "Harry, we have to stop." She saw him take a step in the water and then stop, indecision on his face. To be safe, she quickly thought of the foyer, built up her magic, and as Harry's indecision turned into shock, she touched her hands together. With a crack, she had successfully Apparated into the house, where she stood dripping wet. Feeling the need for more space, she ran for her room, heedless of the water dripping from her.

In her room, she locked the door and headed for the bathroom. Stepping into the shower, she started it and took a long hot shower to relax her as she thought about what had almost happened, although she consider that perhaps a cold shower would better dampen her "fires". She had so many emotions running through her, she did not know what to think. She was elated, angry, relieved, disappointed, sexually excited, ashamed, and very confused. Slowly she got dressed and headed back downstairs. Harry's bedroom door had been closed, but then that was normal.

She found him sitting in the library, fully clothed as normal, and with his head in his hands. "Harry? Are you OK? I'm -- sorry ..."

"Ginny, it's not your fault." He still had not lifted his head, as if he could not bear to look at her. "I lost all thought and started thinking with my -- well, not with my brain. I can't believe what we almost did." He was so shocked with himself and his lack of self-control, he could hardly think straight at the moment. That lapse on his part and what it would have led to was revolting to him; the first time was supposed to be special.

"No, Harry, it's not that simple. I'm the one that took a prank too far and tempted you too much. I do hope you noticed that I was snogging you back and my hands weren't still either."

"But Ginny..."

"Ssh, Harry, listen to me, because there's something else you need to know. The only reason we didn't go through with it was because I remembered I wasn't on the potion, and well, this is the fertile time of the month for me. If it wasn't for that, if I had been on the potion, I don't think I would not have tried to stop you. In fact, I would have willingly taken my suit off and jumped on you. So all the blame does not lie with you."

"Still that should not have happened..."

"I understand Harry, and I love you for the fact that you are so loving and respectful of me. But do realize that I led you on. That's something that I'm not proud of either. I believe I surprised myself too." Ginny paused and Harry said nothing. "Harry, remember how you said you learned something during the attack at Christmas? About not turning your back on any enemy you weren't completely sure was unable to attack you?"

"Yeah..."

"I think there's a lesson here for us. We're not perfect Harry, we can fail as a couple and hurt each other. So we need to be careful about that. We need to not put ourselves in situations where we can hurt the other."

"I can do that, if you can forgive me for my thoughtlessness," he told her very seriously.

She gave him a small smile. "I can forgive you easily, Harry. Can you forgive me for what I did?"

He turned to her and drew her into a tight hug. "Easily, Ginny, very easily." He tenderly kissed the top of her head before he told her,

"Let's go eat lunch, then go back to the castle. I don't believe anything else will happen today, but I don't want to tempt fate either."

"Yeah, that sounds good, Harry," Ginny agreed.

Back at the castle, Ginny pulled out some Ancient Runes homework and busied herself in that. Harry searched and found Neville staring off into space. "Hey, Neville, what's up?"

"Oh, just thinking Harry. What's up with you? This is unusual to see you here on a Saturday afternoon."

"Yeah, well, Ginny and I decided we needed to do some things here. She has some extra homework as her OWLs are coming, and I thought I'd come see if you're busy. I've got something special for you," Harry told him. "That is, if you have time and want to come see."

"Sure," Neville replied and got up out of the comfortable chair he had been in. As they walked out the portrait hole, he asked, "Everything OK between you and Ginny?"

"Yes," Harry said with a smile. "She's definitely still my girlfriend. Why? You want to ask her out?" Harry said teasingly.

"Harry, any guy who's not blind would like to ask Ginny out; she's a great person and pretty, though I doubt that any of us but you could make her happy or stand up to her. I've watched her in the DA class. I know she's holding back, but even the limited way she does fight leaves the rest of us far short."

"Yeah, she is pretty special," Harry admitted with some pride and love.

"No, I was just noticing that since you're back early, and not spending time together, well, I was wondering if everything is all right between you two." Then Neville quickly added, "Not that I'm trying to pry."

Harry smiled at his friend. "No worries, mate. Ginny and I did learn something about ourselves today. I think we each saw ourselves in a new way, and each other too, I suppose. It's given us something to



think about, but it's not going to cause us to break up. In fact, I think that given time, it will cause us to be stronger because we understand ourselves better. Sorry to be so vague, but it's a bit personal."

"Hey, no problem, Harry. I understand. In fact, I was doing a little bit of self-examination when you found me, so I understand really well."

"So, come to any useful conclusions?" Harry asked.

"Yeah, I'm clueless."

Harry laughed. "Oh, wow, you sound just like me. Well, I will say that figuring that out is a huge first step towards fixing the problem, or so I've found. Ah, here we are."

"What's in the Room of Requirement today, Harry?"

Pacing, Harry thought of a Dueling Room like he had at home. Inside, it had that familiar feel. "Neville, I know we've done some extra defense work to help you out, but today, we're going to start on a little program to take you to the next level. Now that I think about it, I think I'll bring Ron in here too, but today is your day." He made a mental note to talk to Ginny about bring Hermione in for some extra lessons so she would not be left behind.

"What are we going to do?" Neville asked with excitement.

Harry pulled five little flesh colored things out of his pocket and set them on the ground. With his wand, he enlarged the items. "Neville, these things are practice dummies. Let me show you how they work, then start you training with them."

(Sat 3 May)

Harry, Hermione, and Neville climbed into the stands for the last Quidditch game of the year. It was Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff. While Gryffindor was undefeated, if Hufflepuff could win, then they would win the Quidditch cup because of their large win over Slytherin. Everyone thought it would be a close game.

As Harry sat down, the teams came out. He watched Ginny closely, and he noticed that Hermione was watching Ron closely. That caused him to again consider Hermione's question from a month ago about Ginny being able to touch his Family key. Harry had spent a lot of free time thinking about her question, and he could only come up with one logical answer. He had even gone so far as to consult Nate, but the portrait did not know how the key actually worked, just how to use it. Still, he had a possible answer, and the more he considered it, the more he liked it. The question now became: What to do next?

Madam Hooch started the game. Harry tried to watch the Chasers and Ginny, but when it came down to it, he had eyes only for Ginny. At the two hour mark, it was not looking good for Gryffindor, as Ron and the Chasers were having a really bad day; while the Hufflepuff Chasers were having an excellent day. The score stood at 290-120 in Hufflepuff's favor.

Then Harry saw the Golden Snitch at the same time Ginny did. She was in a tough spot. She had to decide whether to try and catch the Snitch and mercifully end the game, or let it go and hope her team's Chasers would make the score closer. But then the Hufflepuff Seeker saw the Snitch too and took the decision out of her hands, she had to go after it. Less than two minutes later, Ginny grabbed the little winged ball, but since Hufflepuff had scored again, Gryffindor ended up losing the game by thirty points. Hufflepuff took the match and the Quidditch cup for the year.

Hermione had her hands full trying to comfort Ron. He was extremely unhappy with the way he had played. Actually, he was unhappy with the whole team, except for Ginny.

Harry wrapped Ginny in his arms and told her, "You did what you had to do, Ginny. Don't worry about it." She did not cry, but she was still unhappy. Deciding he needed to do more, Harry pulled them into an alcove and used his Manor key to take them home.

Pulling her into the kitchen, he called out, "Winky?"

The little elf popped in, "Yes Master Harry? What can I do for you?"

"Winky, we need some cheering up. Can you please make us two sundaes? Oh, and use lots of chocolate," Harry told her.

"Yes Sir, coming right up!"

Ginny grinned at him. "You've learned one of my secrets."

"Oh, which one?" he asked with amusement.

"That chocolate fixes every problem, or at least makes you happy enough to find a solution," she told him. He laughed and they enjoyed the chocolaty desserts when they came.

After a few sticky kisses, Harry turned into a phoenix and flashed them back to his office. A nice private place they used from time to time so no one would see them return. Unlocking it, they came out into his classroom, only to find another couple there. A couple, who was going at it hot and heavy, and to Harry and Ginny's delight, had not noticed their intruders.

Harry put his finger to his lips and motioned her to the nearest desk. They both sat down very quietly. Harry adopted a very studious look before he said, "That's how you do it. I always wondered how to get the hand on her bum."

Ron and Hermione sprung apart and wands came out, but once they saw and heard Harry and Ginny laughing, they relaxed a little, though they looked very embarrassed.

"How did you do that?" Ron asked, and not too kindly either.

His sister managed to stifle her laughter enough to answer, Harry was still chuckling. "Oh Ron, if you could have seen the way the two of you flew apart."

"I said, how did you do that?" Ron was insistent.

Harry finally got control of himself. "Ron, there's any number of ways: secret passages you don't know about, inter-castle Floo travel,

turning into small animals, my Invisibility Cloak, or the most obvious: we were in the office before you came into the classroom."

"And what were you doing in the office?" Ron persisted in his interrogation.

"Now, now, Ron," his sister told him. "Remember? We agreed to leave that subject alone. So I won't tell about Harry comforting a sad Quidditch player, and you won't tell about Hermione comforting a sad Quidditch player."

Ron grumbled but did not say anything else. Hermione was still being very quiet about getting caught.

Harry decided to put them out of their misery. "Let's all leave. I can also see that I need a better locking spell on my classroom." Harry locked his office, then he locked his classroom with an extra ward. "There, still not totally safe, but it will not be easy and should discourage most couples looking for a snogging spot."

Ron and Hermione went one way, and Harry and Ginny went back to the Tower. Ginny joked and laughed about it for the next hour, and decided the situation was as good as the chocolate sundae.  
(Fri 16 May)

Harry and his close friends walked into the Room of Requirement. Soon, the rest of the DA arrived and Harry called the meeting to order.

"I'm glad everyone could make it tonight. I know our evening meetings are usually short, and this one will be no exception. This is the last meeting of the year, since OWLs, NEWTs, and end of year exams will be starting in a few weeks. I want to thank everyone for their hard work this year. I think we've accomplished a lot."

"That's because we had a good teacher," Cho Chang called out. A lot of people agreed with her, then they started clapping.

Harry raised his hands and quieted them down. "Thanks everyone, however, let's also give a round of applause to my four helpers." He made Ginny, Hermione, Ron, and Neville stand up for their applause.

"Now, don't forget what you've learned, and should you have to use these skills, please keep a cool head about you. A fully functioning brain is one of the best weapons you can have. So, I have two small things planned. First, I'll answer any questions I can for a few minutes." Harry was not totally sure he wanted to do this, but felt he should allow them to ask in case he had not covered something well enough.

A third-year Ravenclaw, Wayne, asked the first question. "Are you going to be teaching here again next year?"

Harry smiled. "Well, the Headmaster has yet to ask me to come back, but I see no reason I won't be here. As the Headmaster told me, competent Defense teachers are hard to find. That being said, I hope everyone does well on your final tests this year. Please do well so I look good and can return." That got a few laughs.

Amanda, Ginny's roommate who took her prefect position raised her hand and asked, "Harry? Assuming you teach again next year, are you going to use the same format, where you'll need helpers in class?"

"Good question. Yes, I think I will. In fact, let's see here..." Harry dug in his robes and pulled out a large piece of parchment and stuck it to the wall behind him. "There, if you will be in the sixth or seventh year next year, at the end of this session you can sign up if you'd like to be considered to be a helper in one of my classes next year. No promises on being picked, but you have to be signed up to be considered."

Dennis Creevey asked the next question, and the one Harry had dreaded most. "Harry, are you really the Chosen One like the Daily Prophet calls you?"

Harry had an answer waiting for this. "What I am doesn't matter. That being said, Voldemort keeps coming after me, so I must be able to defend myself. I also hope everyone here has picked up enough skills to be able to defend themselves too. Next?"

"Can you show us how good you really are?" Cho Chang asked with a smile.

It occurred to Harry that Cho might still like him, but it did not matter to him anymore. "Well, I can't let all my tricks be known, but how about we move into the second thing I had planned for tonight, a couple of demonstration duels." He got cheers for that. "The first match will be Ron and Neville. Everyone to the side, and you are responsible for shielding yourself. Ron? Neville? Have fun, but please remember not to hurt the other too badly."

Three minutes later, everyone was clapping for the two boys. Harry had called a halt after Neville had scored a major cut on Ron's wand arm. Harry healed the cut and pronounced Neville the winner. The extra training showed in both of them.

Harry then put his hand out for Ginny, who joined him. "We won't go all out, but here's a sample of how good you can get with a lot of work." They bowed to one another. For the next two minutes, there were a lot of spells cast and a lot dodged. Finally, Harry scored by hitting Ginny with a spell that flipped her upside down. As she was wearing pants and a jumper, it wasn't embarrassing, but it was enough to make her lose her concentration. Harry summoned her wand, and it was all over. With a flick of his wand, he righted her and set her down so he could give her the wand back. They both got a lot of applause.

Harry ended the meeting, and while those who would be there next year signed up on the list, Harry made sure his four friends knew to stay until the end. When they were alone, Harry retrieved the sign-up list and pulled his special trunk out of his pocket and enlarged it.

As he opened the trunk, he told his friends, "You've all been really special to me over the last year, each in your own way, starting with going with me to the Department of Mysteries last June. I want to give you a 'thank you' for that." Harry opened the fourth compartment. Reaching in, he pulled out a red vest. Reading the name tag, he held it out to Hermione. "You can wear this under other clothes so no one will know you have it on. It's great for avoiding the effects of many spells that hit you in the back. But don't become complacent, it won't

stop all spells," he told them. He handed the rest of the vests out. Everyone was thrilled.

Reaching back in, he also pulled out boots for each of them. The boots went to just below their knees. "You can't hide these," Harry told them, "but then again, they look so good, who wants to?" Everyone laughed.

Finally, Harry started handing out coats like his, and like the vests and boots, these were reddish. "You can't quite hide these either, but a cloak over them helps."

Ron could not stand it any more. "Harry, we can't take all this from you. It's too expensive."

Harry looked at his best mate. "Ron, and this goes for all of you, friendship is expensive too, and real friendship can not be bought. It is only earned and given. Each of you has given me that, please let me give this to you, to make your lives safer. Besides, all this did not cost me a single Knut. Feel better Ron?"

"Huh? Come on Harry, I've seen stuff like this in the store. It's all very expensive," Ron told him.

"If you had to go buy it all, that would be true. But, what if you got the dragon hide for free, and you gave some of the extra to the man who made all of this for you for his payment? No money ever changed hands," Harry told him simply.

"Right," Neville said sarcastically, "you just happened to find a dragon hide laying around."

"Oh, you just never know what comes your way sometimes. It's the life of a superhero. You meet Dark Lords, lots of minions, dragons, beautiful redheads; you just have to deal with each as you come across them," Harry teased.

They all laughed as Harry put away his trunk. No matter how they asked, Harry would not say anything more about how he got a dragon hide. Ginny even asked too just to make it look good. Harry had one

extra vest left, besides his. He would do his best to deliver it this summer. He hoped its recipient would be able to receive it.  
(Fri 30 May)

As the end-of-year tests came closer, Harry had started ending their training in time to come back to the castle for dinner, instead of having dinner at the Manor and then continuing until eight or nine. So tonight, they were having dinner with Ron and Hermione, plus the rest of the school, in the Great Hall. The current topic of conversation was about the upcoming summer, and that got Harry to thinking.

Life was not easy, or at least never normal for him. He thought there was a line in the Prophecy about that, but he decided not to even think about the stupid Prophecy right now. Instead, he watched Ginny as she argued with Hermione about the merits of revising during the summer, above and beyond what was required. Now that he had finally come to grips with his feelings about Ginny, he recognized her as his greatness weakness, and that required special consideration.

Finishing dinner, they all walked back up the Tower. Hermione wanted to revise some more, as did Ginny. Ron tried to engage Harry in a game of chess, but Harry smiled and told him later. Before Ginny could go get her things, Harry pulled her into his room for a short talk. When he mentioned his thoughts for the summer, he was pleasantly surprised to find her in total agreement with him. Harry let her go revise, and he transformed and flashed to the side of The Burrow, and transformed back. Walking to the back door, he knocked and waited.

The man of the house answered. "Harry, what a surprise. Please come in, we were just having dessert, you can join us."

Harry went in, and Mrs. Weasley gave him a big hug. "Harry, sit down for some strawberry cake. How's Ron and Ginny? And what brings you here tonight?"

"They're both fine. Umm, good cake." Harry took a couple of more bites as he readied himself. "I did have something to talk to you



about." Mr. Weasley smiled at the obvious statement. "As strange as this may sound, I'd like to make a request of you."

"Oh?" Molly said brightening.

Harry was not sure why the woman was getting excited, but he plowed on. "In light of what happened at Christmas time, I'm concerned for your family, and especially Ginny. So I'd like to request that you move to Grimmauld Place for the summer. If it helps, Ginny agreed with this when I asked her."

The Weasleys were taken aback by that. "You're serious, aren't you?" Mr. Weasley finally said.

"Yes, sir. That is not my first preference, but Ginny agreed it was the option most people would be agreeable to."

"And what was your first preference?" Mr. Weasley asked calmly.

"That you three move from The Burrow to Headquarters, and Ginny would come to stay at my house in one of the extra bedrooms," Harry told them evenly.

Molly's reaction was instantaneous. "Absolutely not!"

Harry smiled. "I assumed you'd feel that way, which is why I did not present it, but I care for her and her safety enough to want the best for her; and therefore, I care for your family's safety too."

"Is that why you want us to move, Harry? Because you care for her?" Mr. Weasley asked him.

Taking the last bite of his cake, Harry finally looked back up her father. "No, sir. It's taken me months to figure out, but I love her. I want to marry her some day." He saw a smile on the man's face and heard a gasp from his wife. Looking over, he saw the bright look there again and realized this was probably what she thought he had come there for originally.

Arthur got his attention with, "So are you asking for our permission and blessing to marry Ginny?"

Harry looked at him and tried to work out what to say. "Uh, yes sir, I hadn't planned to do that tonight, but I suppose I am doing that now, too."

The father smiled. "You have our blessing Harry, but our permission will have to wait until Ginny has finished school."

Harry both smiled and sighed. "I suppose that will have to do."

"When did you plan on asking her?" Molly was curious.

"Probably sometime this summer; it appears there is no hurry. Nevertheless, you now understand why I care so much about her safety?" Harry queried.

"Yes, Harry, we do," Arthur told him. "Why don't you let us think about it for a week. Come back next Friday and we'll have an answer for you."

"Sure. Don't forget this would be a great opportunity to learn more about Muggles since the Grangers would be there every evening," Harry told him.

"Harry!" Molly exclaimed when she saw the look of joy come over her husband's face. "That's not fair."

The young man grinned as he got up. "Just pointing out the obvious, Mrs. Weasley. Oh, and don't tell Ginny about me asking for her; I want to surprise her. Bye!"

Once he was outside, Harry Portkeyed to his house, then again back to his room at school. Walking back out into the common room, he found the girls still revising and Ron reading a Quidditch book. "Hey Ron? Still want to beat me at chess?"

His redheaded friend looked up. "Sure, Harry; let me get my board." Ron jumped at the chance since Harry rarely played anymore.

After they started playing, Harry casually asked, "So Ron, would you like to live at Grimmauld Place this summer?" Ron gave him a quizzical look, so Harry added, "I understand there is a Muggle family living there now, so you'd have to be willing to share the house with them."

Ron perked up, the game forgotten. "That would be great, but why do you ask?"

"I've heard your parents are thinking about living there for the summer. If you like the idea, perhaps you should write your mum this week and tell them you agree." Harry smiled as he saw the expressions go over Ron's face. Ron was so distracted by that thought, Harry almost won his first game.

(Fri 6 Jun)

Harry and Ginny finished their training and lessons for the day just before dinner. They Flooed to The Burrow to eat with her parents. Mrs. Weasley greeted them enthusiastically. Mr. Weasley was also very warm in his greeting. Ginny looked at Harry, who shrugged and whispered to her, "I guess they're just glad to see you. It's been five months since Christmas."

Dinner was a nice time of talking about what was happening with everyone, but dessert brought a change. As Mrs. Weasley served pie, Mr. Weasley asked, "Harry, if you're so concerned about safety, why don't you have all of us stay at your house over the summer? You said you had extra bedrooms, or are there only two?"

"And I could help out there and buy groceries," Mrs. Weasley added.

Harry smiled, he had been expecting this. "I have enough bedrooms. The real reason is because I have layers of safety. Least safe, but safe enough for me to sleep in is Grimmauld Place, providing I ward off the floor I sleep on. Next up is my room at school. Finally, the only place I feel completely safe is my home. Each layer is harder to get into, and the requirements to have access to my home are high enough, very few people can meet them. My home is the only place I

am willing to walk around without my wand with me, and even there, I usually have it just because I'm used to having it on me."

"That's quite extreme Harry," Mr. Weasley finally said.

The young man smiled. "Perhaps, but it is keeping me alive, and I'm reasonably happy. I'd be a lot happier if I did not have to live that way, but that would require a certain Dark Wizard to die first." Harry was slightly frustrated that Dumbledore had found no leads on where Voldemort was hiding so an assault could be planned, but then, Harry considered that the Dark Lord was probably living under a Fidelius Charm as he was.

"If it will make you feel any better," Harry continued, "I was going to give Ron and Hermione access this summer, but I've decided not to do that now that I've fully thought through my 'layers of safety' strategy. While I fully trust them, I am also heeding the lesson taught to me by my parents."

"You mean of having a close friend betray them?" Ginny asked.

"Yes. I don't think any of my friends would do that, but I'm not taking any chances," Harry told them solemnly. "A real friend might be sad to hear they can't come to my house, but they would understand and continue to be my friend."

"Very well, Harry. We'll temporarily move the week before school lets out," Mr. Weasley told him. "I assume we'll be seeing you there a lot?"

Harry smiled, "Probably, though Ginny will be visiting my house during the day from time to time as well. That's really the only place we can practice our training to keep our skills up." Mrs. Weasley did not look happy with that, but she did not say anything either.

As the conversation seemed to be over, Mrs. Weasley stood. "Ginny, would you grab those plates and help me wash up, please?" Despite the "please," Ginny knew it was a command and obeyed.

When the women had left, Arthur looked to the young man with him. "Harry, I don't know how much you've picked up at school, but I thought I would ask you what you understand about marriage in the Wizarding world."

Harry mentally groaned as he knew what was coming. The only question for him was how to get out of it. "Mr. Weasley, I understand quite a bit. Sirius actually talked with me about marriage and sex at some length one day. I know marriage is very serious, as it's 'for as long as we both shall live'. Please don't worry about us. I would never do anything to intentionally hurt Ginny. I care for her, and love her, more than I do myself. And I'll take very good care of her, she'll never want for anything she truly needs."

The man smiled at him. "That is a load off my mind. Perhaps one day you'll appreciate this when you have a little girl who's about to go out into the world, and there's a young man who is seeking her."

"Actually sir, I already appreciate it. As I told Ginny last summer, you and your family have shown me what love is, especially by allowing me into your family as if I was one of your children. I wished I could have grown up here as a child. There was nothing at all to like where I did grow up," Harry admitted.

A few minutes later, Ginny and her mother came back out of the kitchen. Ginny had a most interesting look on her face, sort of puzzled, amused, and slightly embarrassed, Harry thought. They said their good-byes and Harry took them back to his house and then to his office. This time, there was no one in his classroom.

Walking back to the Tower, Ginny looked at Harry and finally asked the question that had been going around in her mind. "Harry, do you know why mum would have given me a refresher version of 'the talk' tonight?"

"The talk?"

"You know, the importance of marriage and waiting until you're married for sex, how to use the contraception potion, that sort of stuff." She watched Harry turn slightly pink.

"I guess you're parents must think we're getting serious. Your dad mentioned some of that to me tonight too."

Ginny continued to watch him. "Are you serious about me, Harry?"

Harry's mind raced as he tried to decide how to answer that. He was not ready to tell her of his big plans for her, but he knew she also deserved an honest answer. Seeing a tapestry ahead that covered a secret passage, he pulled her behind it and into the hidden corridor a ways so they could talk a little more privately.

He pulled her close and held her in his arms. She was pressed against him with her arms in front of her and her hands on his shoulders. "Yes, I'm serious about you. Are you all right with that?"

Ginny gave him a coy little smile as she pressed forward to give him a deep kiss, one he gladly received. "Since you know how I've felt about you for years, do you really have to ask that?"

He lightly chuckled as he brought his forehead down to rest on hers. "I suppose not, but considering how much misery I went through because someone didn't ask me how I felt about something, it seemed like a good idea to ask."

"How serious are you Harry?" she was curious. She had caught him staring at her, really staring at her over the last couple of weeks, and wondered if he were having thoughts about them and the future.

Harry knew what she was asking and avoided the question. "Serious enough that I wished you would spend the summer with me."

"Har-ry!" she said with surprise. "The more I think about it, the more I'm glad it didn't work out that way."

"Why not? You told me you agreed with me when I told you what I thought would be best."

"I did then," she admitted. "But now, if we were to do that, I'm afraid that I'd be staying in your bedroom not mine. And no, that's not

because you would try to get me there, it's because I'm not sure I could resist temptation and I'd find myself going there on my own."

He grinned at her. "Wow, us rogues have a real pull on our women?"

"That better be woman, and yes, I'm afraid you do. There's almost nothing I wouldn't do for you Harry."

"Almost?" She had said something similar before, and he thought he would find out what she meant this time.

"Don't worry," she told him as she understood why he had asked. "It's just a turn of phrase to give me some wiggle room. The reality is, I probably would do anything for you Harry. If it took stepping in front of a Killing Curse to save you, I would."

"You're assuming I'd let you do that, as I would take one for you."

"Then there better be two of them, Harry. I don't want to live without you."

"I feel the same way, Ginny."

She smiled at him, "Then you've truly found love, haven't you?"

"Only because of you." He kissed her gently, then she deepened it. Soon, all time and sense of surrounding was lost. They returned to the Tower a few minutes after curfew out of breath from laughing and running back. They also looked somewhat disheveled, but they did not care.

## Chapter 17: Big Changes

(Mon 30 Jun)

All the students had been home for three days, yet Harry had seen Ginny each day by going over to Grimmauld Place. Today was the start of their summer workout schedule, so Ginny came to see him. They worked out and trained much like they had done all year, and would do so three times a week. As dinnertime rolled around, Harry called it quits for the day, and told Ginny to hurry up and change for dinner. Winky was making something for them.

Harry changed as fast as he could, then opening his window, he used his broom to fly out and up, careful to stay away from Ginny's windows. On top of the house, he conjured a small platform of eight feet by eight feet. He went back to his room, and Ginny was none the wiser.

After a nice dinner, Harry took her hand and walked her outside. He pulled his broomstick from his pocket and enlarged it. Getting on, he scooted up so she would have room. She took the hint and got on behind him. "What's this for Harry? We haven't flown together like this for a long time."

"Hold on, you'll see," he told her as he took off. He flew around the property, turning and diving just enough to make her hold on tightly, but nothing serious. Eventually, he flew her up to the top of the house and landed on his new platform.

"I don't remember this being here before," she commented as they landed.

"That's because it wasn't here until just before dinner," he said with a smirk. Harry conjured a small couch for them. Grabbing her hand, they sat down.

"The view is wonderful, but why are we up here?"

"Mostly to enjoy the view. Do you think I should add onto the house and make this platform permanent?" he asked her.



"What? This isn't permanent now?" she asked with some concern because of their height above the ground.

"No, it's only conjured, but don't worry, most of my large conjured items last several days. The rest last a lot longer. But Ginny, do you like what you see? Do you like Potter Estates?"

"Sure, Harry. What's not to like? You have everything here a person could ask for."

Harry had to make sure. "Do you like the house too?"

"Yes," she said slowly, as she started to wonder if this conversation was going where she thought it was going as Harry was not acting quite like himself.

He was starting to get nervous. Harry thought he knew what the answer would be, but there was still a small nugget of doubt. "Could you live here for the rest of your life?" She slowly nodded. "Would you live here for the rest of your life, with me?"

"H-Harry?" Her voice was shaking slightly. "Are, are you asking what I think you're asking?"

Getting off the couch, Harry got down on one knee in front of her, still holding her hands. "Ginny, would you marry me?"

After the briefest of hesitations, she jerked her hands from his and grabbed his head and pulled it to her so she could kiss him. The kiss was long and deep.

As they broke apart, Harry managed to get out, "I suppose I can take that for a yes."

Ginny laughed and her words started rushing out in her excitement. "Oh Harry, of course it's a yes. I mean, I've only been dreaming about this since I first saw you when I was ten. Well, maybe I had a few childish fantasies when I was younger and heard the 'Harry Potter

Story' as a little girl; but when I first met you and saw you, I knew you were mine. It was only a matter of time."

Harry turned a little red, but he did not look away from her. "I'm sorry I wasn't faster realizing that, Ginny. We could have had a lot longer time together."

"That's all right, Harry, it wasn't your fault you were raised the way you were. In fact, it may be good it's worked out this way. The soonest we can get married is when I turn seventeen, and it's going to be hard to wait that long for you." She started smiling and teased him with, "You -- rogue."

He laughed. "Well, if I was a real rogue, I'd take you away right now and marry you anyway; your age not withstanding."

She laughed too. "And I wouldn't fight you either."

"Ginny, I had us eat a little early for a reason. We can do one more thing tonight, if you'd like."

"What's that?" she asked.

"We can put on disguises and go to Diagon Alley. There are a couple of jewelers there. We can get rings, though we'll need to charm them so they're invisible," he explained.

She smiled, "A ring would be great, but why can't others see them?"

"Because I want to keep you safe. An engagement ring would probably make you more of a target than you already are. I'm sorry, as I know that takes some of the fun out of it for you. I suppose that's part of what you get with me. My life and I are rarely normal," he told her.

"That's all right, Harry; that's part of what makes you so special," she told him.

They left for Diagon Alley not looking like themselves; and nearly two hours later as the shop was ready to close, they finally had rings

picked out. Ginny could not believe what they had spent, but Harry had handed over the nearly seven hundred Galleons without batting an eye. She had a two carat diamond on her finger, though it was disillusioned at the moment. Unfortunately, she would only get to see it when she was at Harry's house.

She also had trouble explaining the large grin on her face when she got home. Her "I'm just happy" answer didn't fly well and her parents suspected Harry had popped the question, but they did not see a ring on her finger, so they did not say anything. Hermione was suspicious too, but she had no facts to work with.

(Wed 9 Jul)

It had taken Harry a week to find the answer to his question, and it was Professor Dumbledore who gave it to him. With the last red dragon hide vest wrapped in a box, Harry and Ginny Flooed to the Leaky Cauldron and took a taxi ride to the house of Rodney and Margaret Taylor. It was a quirky looking house on the edge of London, but Harry figured the unusualness ran in the family. He knocked on the front door in the middle of the afternoon.

A woman a little older than Mrs. Weasley answered the door. "Yes, may I help you?"

"Hi, my name is Harry Potter and this Ginny Weasley. We're friends of Luna from school. Is it possible to see her?"

The woman smiled. "Yes, Luna is here. Why don't you come in?" As they went in, she tried to decide how to ask an important question. "I'm Margaret Taylor. How did you find my niece, or all of us really?"

"Professor Dumbledore at school told us. He knew we were good friends of Luna," Harry explained. "Why?"

"Because we've tried not to be found. We don't want to put Luna in any more danger. I shall have to speak with the Headmaster about telling others," the woman said with some disappointment in her tone.

"We won't tell anyone, we're very good with secrets," Ginny told her. "I suspect Professor Dumbledore told us only because he knows that too, as he knew we were special friends with Luna. Will Luna be returning to school next year?"

"That has yet to be decided. Let me go get her and you can see for yourself. Perhaps you can give me an opinion on that question too," Mrs. Taylor said as she left.

Harry and Ginny looked at each other wondering what she meant. A moment later, Luna came back in with her aunt. She was dressed normally, but the look on her face was not normal for Luna. She looked so calm as to be expressionless.

"Why don't you sit here and talk with your friends, Luna? I'll go get some drinks and biscuits for everyone." The aunt guided her niece to a chair facing them.

"Hi Luna," Ginny greeted her friend.

"Hi Ginny," Luna answered very evenly. Her aunt left the room.

"Hi Luna," Harry said.

The blonde girl looked at him intently. "Harry."

"How are you doing, Luna?" Ginny asked.

"Fine."

"We missed you at school this year. Are you looking forward to coming back next year?" Ginny asked.

Luna only shrugged.

"I missed you helping with the DA this year Luna. I would have loved to have had your help," Harry told her. The girl only looked at him. "I have a present for you." He held the brightly wrapped box out to her. She slowly took it and sat it in her lap. "Go ahead and open it, it's for you."

Her aunt came back into the room with a tray of four glasses of punch and a plate of icing covered biscuits. As she set the tray down, she indicated to the visitors to take something. "Tear the paper off and open the box Luna," her aunt told her gently.

Luna slowly followed the directions. Opening the box, she pulled out a red scaly vest.

Harry told her, "That's for being such a good friend and helping me last year. Wear it whenever you leave the house, it will make you safer."

"Safe, Harry?" Luna looked up at him.

"Yes, I'm safe, and you can be safe too," he told her. His heart was about to break for his friend.

"I'm glad." Luna hugged the vest to her.

Mrs. Taylor took charge in the silence that developed. "Luna? Why don't you tell your friends good-bye, you can go lay down for awhile."

"Good-bye Harry," she simply said as she got up, still hugging the vest to her.

"I'll be back in a moment," her aunt said as she guided her niece from the room. When she returned alone, she asked, "So, what do you think?"

"Has she changed any since she came home from St. Mungo's?" Harry asked.

"No. She came home in early May, but she's been like this she started recovering in February. She just not the same little girl I remember," her aunt said with a lot of sadness.

"If it matters Mrs. Taylor, I would suggest a private tutor. Even though Luna was able to handle Hogwarts before, she had a hard time, socially. I don't think that's the best place for her now," Ginny told her.

"I've never been there, but I'm afraid you're right. Professor Dumbledore said something similar."

"Are you a witch?" Ginny asked.

"No, my husband and I are both Squibs. That's another reason for our hiding. We really can't defend ourselves from You-Know-Who and his followers."

"Has Luna mentioned who did this to her? Any names?" Harry wanted to know.

"No, all she's ever said was a non-sense phrase: He's just like his son." The woman shrugged, but Harry's blood ran cold.

"Lucius Malfoy, I'd bet anything. I'll kill the bastard myself," Harry said with anger. Then realizing what he had said, he softened. "I'm sorry Mrs. Taylor, I've let my anger influence my manners."

She smiled at him. "I understand, I feel the same way myself at times towards whoever did this. But you're just a student. What can you possibly do?"

"I am the age of a student, but I'm actually a fully qualified wizard and an assistant professor at Hogwarts. You would be surprised at what I can do when I put my mind to it," he said with a smile. "I've got a question and maybe two suggestions for you, if I may." The woman nodded. "First, when you were at St. Mungo's, was the name Paul MacDonald ever mentioned in reference to any of the healers?"

After a pause to think, the aunt said, "No, I don't remember that name."

Harry reached into his robes and pulled out a piece of parchment and a pen (much better than a quill and ink when traveling). On it he scribbled:

Paul,

Luna Lovegood is a very good friend of mine who was tortured by Death Eaters. Please try to help her in any way you can. I'll cover any expenses required.

Harry Potter

He folded it and wrote "Healer Paul MacDonald" on the outside. "Here, take this note and Luna to see him at St. Mungo's. He's probably the best Mind Healer in England and a good friend of mine. If anyone can help her, he can."

"Thank you Mr. Potter, that's very kind of you to give us a recommendation."

"Second, I really do recommend a private tutor for her, perhaps after Healer MacDonald has worked with her some. I have a good friend who tutored me, and who Luna already knows and should trust. May I send him by to talk to you?"

"That would be nice, but we really can't afford that at this time. I'm also afraid the same will be true for the Healer, though we will take her by for an evaluation; that can't hurt," Luna's aunt said.

"There will be no charge. I will cover everything," Harry told her.

"Mr. Potter ..."

Harry interrupted her. "Mrs. Taylor, please understand that the reason this happened to Luna was because she was my friend." That shocked the woman. "I'm sorry no one has told you that before, but it is the truth. All five of my closest friends were attacked over Christmas. I managed to personally save three of them, but I did not learn of the attack on Luna and another friend until it was all over, or I would have tried to save them too. Therefore, the very least I can do is to try to make things right, or as right as can be done."

Luna's Aunt Margaret thought about what he had said, and finally told him. "Very well, Mr. Potter. I suppose we can talk to the people you suggest."

"Thank you. The tutor's name is Remus J. Lupin, and you'll find him to look maybe slightly younger than you with brown hair peppered with gray. I can give him your address and have him come see you sometime in the next few days -- if that's all right with you. He is also very good at holding secrets; all of my close friends are."

"Talking to him can't hurt, I suppose."

Harry stood. "Thank you for letting us see Luna, and thank you for taking care of her. Was her father your brother?"

"Yes."

"We're very sorry for your loss. If you don't mind, we'll leave from right here." Harry pulled out his Family key. Ginny also said good-bye as she grabbed Harry's arm. With a last sad smile, Harry took them to his home.

(Thu 31 Jul)

Harry Portkeyed to Grimmauld place for dinner. He knew what was going to happen, it was his seventeenth birthday, after all. As he walked into the kitchen, everyone yelled, "Happy Birthday, Harry!" All of the Weasleys, except for Charlie and Percy, were there, as was almost everyone in the Order of the Phoenix who he knew personally.

He went around and said hello to each person, most of whom had a personal story for him. Kingsley also quietly told him that Paul was seeing Luna and there was hope for some recovery, but it was unknown how it would turn out. Moony told him that he had talked to the Taylors and set up a schedule for a couple of hours twice a week. Mrs. Taylor was pleasantly surprised when Luna had recognized her old Defense teacher.

Albus Dumbledore had given him the greatest surprise of all. He offered Harry a job as a full professor, still in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry told him he'd take the job, they could work out the details later.

The most fun conversation came, predictably, from Fred and George. Like Harry and Ginny, they were also wearing their dragon hide vests,



the ones he had seen on them at the end of Harry's fifth year. They said Harry's and Ginny's looked good, but not as good as theirs. Harry had to work hard to resist the temptation to ask them, "But did you go kill your own dragon for yours?" He was going to use that line when he was free to discuss that adventure.

Hermione used the party to tell everyone she had made Head Girl. She had received the letter that morning. Ron was beaming at his girlfriend for her accomplishment. Harry was really happy for her, as was Ginny. Harry was also curious how the prefect duties were going to go when Ron had to do them with Parvati, whom Hermione had said was her replacement. He was also curious if Ron was going to be jealous of Terry Boot, who had made Head Boy.

Harry also got to see an old friend. He had heard of Bill's engagement, so he was not surprised to see Fleur Delacour. "Arry! Iz so good to see you." She gave him a hug with a double kiss, both chaste on his cheeks. He saw Ginny, who was standing next to him, give him a raised eyebrow.

"Fleur, I heard you were at Gringotts. Is that going well for you?" Harry asked.

"Oui! Very well, thanks to Bill," she told him. "'E 'az 'elped me with my English so much."

Harry smiled. "I can tell, you're doing much better. Mrs. Weasley told me the wedding is to be in late August."

"Oui, on ze twenty-ninth. It will be a wonderful time. You must be there. Ze invitations will go out soon." She gave him a big smile. "I 'eard about you and Ginny. Very, very good friends now, oui?"

Harry blushed a bit, Ginny gave him a mildly disapproving look. "Yes we are." He looked around and noticed it was just the three of them, and everyone else looked busy talking to someone else. "I envy you Fleur. I wish Ginny and I could get married, but that's not possible until she turns seventeen next year." He had redeemed himself in Ginny's eyes with that statement.

Fleur gave a light magical Veela laugh. "Oh, 'Arry, you poor boy. You must have it bad then. Iz unfortunate you are not in France. We French understand love; you can be married at sixteen there."

"Really?" Harry suddenly had an idea running through his head. Looking at Ginny, he saw sudden interest on her face as she must have had the same idea. "Is that only for French citizens, or will they marry any European nationals?"

"Anyone. I understand ze Ministry of Magic in France marries many people from all over each year. Very common," the French girl told him.

Harry was about to ask more when Bill came over. "Hey, congratulations Bill. Sorry I haven't told you before, but I haven't seen you since you got engaged."

"No problem, Harry. Thanks! And how's my favorite sister?"

"I'm your only sister, you prat," she said lovingly as she gave him a hug. She was still a bit wary of Fleur and her Veela powers, but Harry seemed much better behaved than Ron had been earlier. Her brother had dropped his drink and gone ga-ga at the part Veela when she had walked into the room earlier. Hermione was still glaring at Ron from time to time.

The rest of the party was nice, but Harry became preoccupied the rest of the evening with planning a trip. He decided to put his phoenix power of location finding to the test tomorrow. If it worked as well as it did when he had been searching for Hermione's house, he would have some interesting information tomorrow.  
(Fri 15 Aug)

The day Harry and Ginny had been planning for over the last two weeks finally came. So far, it appeared no one was any wiser to their plans. Harry had a close call at Ginny's birthday party Monday evening when her dad had cornered him alone and asked him if he had changed his mind about Ginny, since he hadn't seen a ring on her hand yet. Harry had assured the man that "Ginny's big day was

coming very soon". He hated misleading the man he thought of as his surrogate father, but he decided it was for the best.

Ginny arrived at Harry's house just after lunch.

Harry greeted her with a kiss, then asked her, "Are you sure you still want to do this? This is your last chance to back out."

She laughed. "I still have more time as I haven't said the magic words," she teased him, "but don't worry, Harry, I think this is as great an idea as you do. I'll get to be Mrs. Rogue," she said with a giggle.

"Yeah, but will you still think that the next time you see your parents?"

"That will be, uh, exciting, but I'm still sure. I've got my bag, do you have yours?" she asked.

"Yes, it's shrunk and in my pocket. Got my good robes and a camera too. One last thing before we go." Ginny knew what he meant and pulled out a note and handed it to him. He walked over to the owl perch. "Hedwig, this goes to Mr. Weasley. You'll be able to find him at Grimmauld Place tonight. Whatever you do, make sure it's dark when you get there. Understand girl?" She hooted. "Very good, take your time if you have to, just don't get there before it gets dark," he repeated as he tied the note onto her leg. "Safe flight, girl." The owl took off.

"Your turn to fly Harry," she told him with a grin. Harry transformed into a phoenix and flew above her. She grabbed his tail feathers and they disappeared. When they flashed back in, other than it being slightly warmer and less cloudy, there was not an immediate indication she was now a little over five hundred miles from where she had been a few seconds ago. As Harry landed them behind some thick bushes, she noticed the buildings around her had a different look to them. She felt Harry grab her hand as he removed the Disillusionment charm from her engagement ring.

"This way," he led her out from behind the bushes and towards the biggest building in the area.

Inside, Harry escorted her to a desk with a young woman behind it. "Est-ce que je peux vous aider monsieur?"

"We're looking for the Marriage Office," he slowly asked.

"Oui monsieur, up those stairs and the first door on the left," the woman said with very little accent as she pointed to some stairs on her right.

"And the restrooms?"

"Public restrooms are through those doors," the young lady pointed the other way.

"Thank you," Harry told her and the couple went to the restrooms first.

"We can change in here," he told Ginny. They each went into the proper room. Harry pulled out some small robes that he expanded before he put them on then went back out to wait on Ginny. She came out of the lady's restroom a few minutes later in her nice robes. After a quick glance at him, she used her wand to smooth the wrinkles in his robes. The robes covered their dragon vests nicely.

Grabbing Ginny's hand, he led her up the stairs. He could not read what was on the door, but it was the first one on the left.

"Are you sure about all of this Harry?" she asked.

"Second thoughts, Ginny?"

"No, I just want to make sure it's all legal."

"Well, the man I talked to at the desk downstairs when I came here before gave me the same information that Fleur did. We'll find out for sure in a minute," he told her as he led her through the door. Walking up to the desk in that room, Harry said, "Is this where we can get married?" before the man there could say anything.

"Oui monsieur. Do you have your birth certificates or passports?"

Ginny pulled out her birth certificate and handed it over. She had had to search for it and sneak it out of the family trunk of special papers at The Burrow. Harry also handed his over. He had had to go down to the Ministry of Magic in London to get a copy of his.

The Frenchman looked the documents over without saying anything, and then he started filling out a form with many layers. As he finished filling in the last half of the form, he started asking questions. "Mr. Potter, are you sure you want to get married? Marriage is considered a magically binding agreement for the rest of your life." Harry told him yes. Ginny was asked the same question and also answered yes.

The French clerk continued. "Very well, that will be twenty Galleons. The nice white copy is yours. We will keep this blue copy here on file. The pink copy will be sent to your country's Ministry of Magic for their files, and this gold copy also goes with you to take to your Ministry as they tend to lose documents from us. Hopefully, the pink copy will arrive there to record this marriage, but if not, it is your responsibility to give them the gold copy so they will know you are legally married."

Harry looked to Ginny. "Yes, Harry, I got it. The white one is ours to show off, and the gold one goes to the Ministry when we get home."

"Oui mademoiselle." He took Harry's handful of gold coins. "Take all of these to the next room on the left. The official there will marry you, and it is customary to tip the official."

"Thank you," Harry told him. On a lark, he pulled out ten more Galleons and put it on the desk.

"Merci monsieur, I'll see that your documents are sent Monday morning. They should be in London before the end of next week."

"Uh, could you delay them instead?" Harry asked.

"Oui. I have to send them in within thirty days, but for you, I can put them on the bottom of the stack, which will take nearly four weeks. Enjoy Paris while you are here."

Harry and Ginny went to the next room. There, they found a middle-aged woman as a clerk, plus an older man sitting at a desk. "Is this where we get married?" Harry asked while holding out the form in quadruplet.

"Are you in a hurry monsieur? Or do you want a short ceremony?" the older man asked as he got up and walked toward them. The woman was adding some more information to the marriage form.

"A ceremony would be appreciated," Ginny told him.

"Can you take a few photos too?" Harry asked as he pulled out his camera and enlarged it.

"She can," the man said.

Harry handed her the camera, and put down ten coins on her desk. She smiled at him and started to take photos.

"As marriage is the highest form of love, it is also the most binding form of love, it is for life. So do you," the man looked at the form, "Harry James Potter, take this woman as your wife, to love, honor, and respect for the rest of your life?"

"I will," Harry said with a big smile.

"And do you," he looked at the form again, "Ginevra Molly Weasley, take this man as your husband, to love, honor, and respect for the rest of your life?"

"I will," Ginny said with a bigger smile than Harry's.

"Then please place rings on each other's fingers as a sign of your love." Harry dug out the rings and handed his to Ginny. They slipped both rings on the other at the same time. "I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may seal the marriage with a kiss." He leaned down to sign the form.

Harry pulled Ginny to him and gently kissed her, but she was not having that. She kissed him soundly, and he willingly responded. As

they broke apart, she giggled and whispered to him, "You're mine now."

He hugged her and whispered, "We shall see who is whose, Mrs. Potter." He felt her give him a tight squeeze around his waist.

"I like the sound of that," she whispered back to him.

Harry let go of her for a moment and reached back into his robes. Since he was the top official, Harry thought fifteen coins would be more appropriate. The man took them with a smile, as the woman handed the camera back to Ginny.

"Here are your white and gold forms," the woman told them. "Be sure to file the gold one when you return to London. Enjoy your stay in Paris."

The Potters thanked them and left the building hand in hand. As they were about to leave the Ministry plaza for the Muggle world, they took off their nice robes and put them in their re-enlarged travel bags. As a last pre-caution, Harry used his wand to make them both look five years older than they really were.

"You are going to be so hot in five years, Ginny," he told her.

"You're pretty good looking yourself, Harry," she told him.

Harry took both small bags and they exited the French magical area.

Outside, Harry hailed a cab. He told the driver, "Le Meurice", to which the driver nodded and drove off.

"Is it a nice one Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Very. I paid it a short visit to see it when I made the reservation last week." Harry was going to do his best to hide the bill from her. He would spend more on this weekend than her father probably made in a month, or maybe even two. He knew she knew he was well off, as a place like Potter Manor indicated wealth, but she did not know everything yet. She would soon.

Soon they arrived at the hotel. Ginny was awestruck. It was a good thing Harry had a clue as to how to deal with the Muggle world; she knew she did not, at least not yet. She just hung onto Harry's arm and let him take care of all the details.

Along the way, Harry handed out funny looking pieces of paper to a few people, which Harry had told her was Muggle money called Euros. He also handed a little plastic card to the man behind a counter. Finally, a boy a little older than they were carried their bags for them to the room, after a ride in an elevator. He opened the room and handed the key to Harry. "The Belle Etoile Suite, monsieur."

Harry pointed to a low table in the large room, which had no bed Ginny noticed. The young man understood and gently placed the bags there. Harry handed him a funny piece of paper too, before following him to the door. There, Harry took a little white sign from the back of the door and placed it on the outside of the door before he closed it. Besides "Do not disturb" there were a lot of other words on it Ginny did not recognize. With a wave of his hand, the door was sealed shut.

Coming back to her, he grabbed her hand and led her into the rest of the room. "Shall we see what else we have?" They found another room almost as large as the first one, but it had one of the largest beds in it Ginny had ever seen; it was as large as Harry's at the Manor. The bathroom was larger than The Burrow's living room and luxurious. There was even a large terrace with chairs and a table. Outside on the terrace, they could walk around and see all of Paris laid out before them, including the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

"Oh Harry, this is better than a dream, though I'm not sure I want to know what this cost," she told him in awe.

"Don't worry about it, my love. I wanted something very nice as our honeymoon will not be very long. While I can afford this, please don't get use to it. This really is not our lifestyle."

She laughed. "I know it's not, but it is fun to see once."



"Shall we go back inside? There's something I've been dying to do since you tempted me so thoroughly at the pool several months ago," he told her suggestively.

Ginny grabbed his hand and led him back to the bedroom. "I'm all yours, Harry."

"And you're on your potion?" he asked as he closed the doors to the room.

"Ever since the day after you proposed." He raised an eyebrow at that admission. "I knew we were serious then, Harry, and I wanted to make sure there would be no problems if we slipped and didn't wait." They came together, each undoing buttons, snaps, and zippers on the other. They found the bed was as soft and comfortable as it was large.

"I wonder where Ginny is," Ron asked to the room at large.

"Oh hush, Ron," his girlfriend told him. "Just because you're having to do her duty at dinner cleanup does not give you the right to deny her a little fun. She can make it up to you some other night."

"Don't worry about it, Ron," his mother told him as she wiped the table down. "I have a few words for her when she gets home." Ron smiled at that, and Hermione lightly smacked him with the back of her hand on his shoulder.

Arthur Weasley filled his goblet one more time; he was about to go up to talk to Hermione's father in the library about Muggle forms of communication. Before he could leave, a white owl came in the room after coming in through the fireplace.

Ron wondered how owls did that without getting dirty. "What's Hedwig doing here?"

Everyone in the room watched Harry's owl fly to Arthur. The man untied the note and Hedwig left. Opening it, he read it; then based on his expression, he reread it.

"What is it dear? It shouldn't be too bad, Harry wouldn't send anything bad in a note on an owl," his wife said.

Arthur wordlessly handed the note to her. Molly read the short note.

Dad and Mum,

I'm spending the weekend with my fiancè. Please don't worry about us. We'll see you Monday evening.

Ginny

Molly looked up at her husband, her shock matching his. "Well, at least we know he finally asked her," Arthur told his wife.

"Asked her what?" Ron queried.

"Harry told us he was going to ask Ginny to marry him sometime this summer," Arthur told his son.

"And?" Hermione asked, not surprised at the announcement.

"The note says that she's spending the weekend with her fiancè and they'll be back Monday evening. That's about all it says," the father said before he sat back down at the dining table.

Ron and Hermione went over to his mother and easily took the note from her to read for themselves. "I guess you'll be helping with the dishes all weekend, Ron," his girlfriend said with a smile.

"She is going to be in so much trouble when she gets back," Ron said with a grin.

"I can't believe she's doing this," Molly finally said. "She's completely disregarding everything I told her about waiting for marriage during our last talk." The woman was starting to get angry. "What is she doing to our family name?"

"Potentially nothing," Hermione said, trying to be the voice of reason. Her boyfriend's mother looked at her as if she was spouting

nonsense. "I know it looks bad, Mrs. Weasley, but she might just be spending the weekend at Harry's house to enjoy time together after he asked her to marry him. Harry has said there are multiple bedrooms. The easy way to find out is to have someone go over there and check."

"And how do we do that, Hermione?" Ron asked. "He hasn't even given you and me access."

"No, he hasn't, but we do know one person that he has given access to. We just have to convince him to go check," she replied.

"Who?" Molly asked with vigor.

"His teacher, Professor Lupin," the brunette reminded them.

Molly got up and rushed over to give the girl a hug that squeezed the air out of her. Letting go, she pulled her wand out and cast, "Communis Patronum!" With a smug look, she returned to wiping the table.

The kitchen was spotless almost ten minutes later when Remus Lupin came out of the Floo at Grimmauld Place. He quickly looked around. "Molly? What's the emergency?"

"Oh, Remus, thank you for coming! Ginny and Harry have disappeared. We think they're at Harry's home, but we can't go look. Since you have access, can you please help us?" the mother pleaded.

Remus smiled. "That's an odd request. Perhaps I can help, but why do you think they've disappeared?" Molly handed the note over, and the werewolf read it. "So, they wanted some alone time, and you're concerned?"

"Remus!" the mother started in on him with a glare. "If that was your daughter, how would you feel?"

Lupin handed the note back. "I see your point. Well, I see no harm in seeing if they really are at Harry's house. However, if they are, I can guarantee you that you won't see them until they want to be seen.

Harry is king of his castle, and Harry can beat me with his wand tied behind his back; and that doesn't count what Ginny would do to me, as she has out-dueled me, too. Back in a minute."

The elder Weasleys stared at the werewolf as he put a silencing charm around the fireplace and Flooed away.

"Do you think he was serious?" Molly asked. "My little girl being able to out-duel him?"

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley. He was very serious, she has been able to do that for some time," Hermione told her. "At our last DA meeting in May, Harry and Ginny put on a demonstration for us. I've never seen two people fight like that, and they also said they were holding back. The Headmaster is the only person I know who might possibly stand up to them, and I strongly suspect even he could not stand up to both of them at the same time."

The parents were looking at each other trying to decide how they felt about that, when the Floo came back to life. Out stepped Remus Lupin with a bottle of Butterbeer in his hand. He took down his silencing charm and opened the bottle as he sat down with his old Marauder traits coming out. "Ah, there's nothing like a cold one."

"Well?" Molly asked.

"Dobby is a great elf," the werewolf proclaimed. "When I got there, he had the information we needed. He said that Harry and Ginny are not there, that they would return Monday evening, and then he offered me a cold Butterbeer. Harry made a great choice in hiring him."

"Remus! Who cares about a cold Butterbeer!" Molly yelled. "Aren't you the least bit concerned?! Not only is my daughter gone, but your student has disappeared too!"

Lupin sighed and set the bottle down. "Molly, have a seat and let's discuss this calmly. Once we've done that, we can come up with a plan of action. Running around with no idea will get us nowhere fast. Arthur, have a seat; you kids too, since you know them so well."

As everyone took a seat, the werewolf continued. "Now, first thing. Are they in trouble? I think not. Dobby knew they were going somewhere, and you have a note via Hedwig saying don't worry; and we know Hedwig isn't going to bring us a note except from Harry or Ginny. Knowing Harry and his paranoia about being secure, that tells me this whole thing is planned. Again, knowing Harry, when he makes plans, they are always rock solid. So he and Ginny are safe."

"Great, they're safe; but where are they?" Molly asked.

"That is the sixty-four thousand Galleon question," the ex-professor agreed. "When did you receive the note?"

"After dinner, around eight," Arthur told him.

"All right, so considering flying time for Hedwig, that means the owl left sometime in the afternoon," Lupin said.

"So Harry's house isn't near here then?" Hermione asked.

Moony smiled at her. "The afternoon for me is from noon to about six, that gives you a fairly wide range of distances to consider. The point is that they left when businesses are open. So my guess is that they had a specific time to be somewhere, and probably something specific to do. If they're not going to be back until Monday, the fact that they decided to do something that seems to require all weekend is the real mystery."

"What do you do over a weekend?" Ron asked. "Especially if you need a business to be open at the beginning?" Hermione's eyes suddenly went wide and Ron noticed. "What is it? You've figured it out haven't you?"

"What do two singles do before a weekend? A couple who loves each other very much and is engaged?" She prompted.

Ron knew that sex was an answer, but he figured she had something else in mind so he kept quiet. No need to make a fool of himself.

"No! They wouldn't!" Molly exclaimed loudly.

Remus started chuckling. "Harry is seventeen, and I've rarely seen anything he plans fail. I don't know how they would do it since Ginny is only sixteen, but I think you're right Hermione."

"Hurry, Arthur, we've got to get to The Burrow to check our records trunk." Molly jumped up and ran for the Floo, her husband followed, but only at a quick walk.

"Well?" Ron asked, hoping one of the two would explain what was happening.

"You haven't figured it out yet?" Moony asked.

"You mean other than shagging?" Ron blurted.

The werewolf laughed. "I'm sure that will happen too, but knowing them, it will be afterwards."

"After what?" Ron still did not get it.

"They get married," Hermione said.

"What?! They can't get married. Ginny's only sixteen. And, and we're not there. They wouldn't do that would they?" Ron was beside himself.

"That reaction and your mother's is exactly why they are doing it by themselves," Moony told them. "As to why they're doing it now instead of a year from now? Who knows, but the easiest answer to that is that they merely didn't want to wait."

Ron couldn't believe this conversation. Looking at Hermione, it was obvious she did believe it. "But how did they get around the age problem for Ginny?"

"That is an excellent question, Ron," Moony agreed. "I will say this for Harry, and Ginny too, when they research a problem they really care about, they are almost as good as Hermione. If there is an answer, they will have found it."

Hermione started to say something, but the Floo roared back to life. In quick succession, the Weasley parents walked out in mild shock.

"What did you find?" Lupin asked.

"Ginny's birth certificate is missing," the father slowly said. The two of them slumped down into a chair.

Remus drained the last of his Butterbeer and set the bottle down as he rose. "It's possible I'm wrong, but I suspect that Monday evening, you'll find you officially have a seventh son, and Ginny will officially be Harry's responsibility. Good-night." The werewolf Flooed away with a smile worthy of a Marauder, and wished he had his other two friends to share the joke with.

Molly closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Those two had better be very good, because they're going to need to be when I get a hold of them."

A/N: To preempt some complaints about H/G getting married at 17 and 16, I'd like to point out:

1. This is in character for both Harry and Ginny. First, I refer you to the title of the story; and Harry has been acting like one. Second, Ginny is a bit on the wild side and she does want to do this. Note her "Mrs. Rogue" comment. They want what they want and don't care a whole lot about what others think (Molly included; they know they are well trained and defend against her if required). I also remind you how security conscience Harry is, and this allows him to override her parents so Ginny always stays with him (and she likes that). Is this the most mature decision they could make? Of course not, but this is their character in this story.

2. This is not that unusual for JKR's universe. She has put the story in an anachronistic setting, with people getting married at 17 and 18. Even in "modern America", you only have to go back about 150 years to find marriages with 15 and 16 year-olds. True, that was basically only in the rural parts of the country, but it was not that uncommon (or so my history books told me). My wife used to work with a woman a few years back that was married at 14 (with parental consent obviously), as was her mother, and her grandmother; I can't go there personally, but I recognize reality when it hits me.

3. I have made sure that this is within the law of the story. True, they have to travel to find the right country with a law that allows them to do that, but they are being law-abiding citizens. And better yet, they are "waiting until marriage".

4. More fun, they are reasonably close to within modern law of our world. According to the Internet (which we all know is true ;-)) it was lawful for 16 year-olds to get married without parental permission in Scotland until sometime in 2006. (If someone from Scotland knows otherwise, please correct me and I'll remove this point.)

5. If all else fails, please remember that this is a fictional story.

Complain if you want, I won't flame you, but unless you can address a problem not covered by these 5 points, don't expect me to say much about this issue. – kb



## Chapter 18: Surprises

(Mon Aug 18)

As Monday morning was about to end, Harry got completely dressed for the first time since Friday afternoon. Since then, the most he had worn had been the very nice bathrobe the hotel had provided. That had been required when room service brought their food over the last two and a half days. They had tried over half the menu during their time there. Harry was not sure about some of the French food, but Ginny had declared it all sumptuous.

"Keep your wand handy," he told her. "I'll go settle the bill and be back in a few minutes."

Downstairs, he handed his little credit card that said "HJ Potter" on it to the desk clerk. The clerk became even friendlier to him as the total for the bill came up. Harry told him he wanted to take the bathrobes with him, as the little sign said he could. The clerk happily added that to the bill and presented it to him. Harry signed it and told the clerk they'd be leaving soon. He also asked if they could just leave the key in the room. The clerk told him it there was no problem. Smiling, Harry returned to his wife.

His wife. That was a wonderful thing to consider. Strangely, Harry had found that waking up with her next to him was as good as going to bed with her. This evening might be stressful, but that was nothing compared to the many years they would have together.

Back in the room, he found her finishing up. He checked the room one more time to see if they had left anything, not that they had brought much with them. A quick change for him, and both of them were dressed in their normal Wizarding robes. Ginny wrapped her arms around Harry's neck, and he used his Family Key to take them back to Potter Manor.

Pulling out their two small bags, he enlarged them after he opened the door. "Dobby? Winky?" he called. The two elves popped in.

"Master Harry! Mistress Ginny!" they exclaimed in unison.

The Potters smiled at them. "It's good to see you, too," Harry told them. "If you would, please take these two bags to my room, and move all of Ginny's clothes from her room to the master bedroom. You can put them in my closet for now. We'll deal with the other closet tomorrow. We have a few places to go, so we won't be here for dinner, but we'll be back later tonight."

"Master Harry, Sir?" Dobby spoke up. "Teacher Moony came here Friday night like you said he might. We gave him your message. Is you really married now?"

Harry smiled. "Yes we are. Ginny is completely the mistress of the house." The elves cheered and Dobby ran forward and hugged Ginny's right leg, while Winky curtsied. Both Potters gave an easy-going laugh. Grabbing Ginny around the waist, Harry Apparated them to an alley in Muggle London. There, he took Ginny shopping for some new clothes and other things she needed, but had never bought for herself. They enjoyed that for a couple of hours.

Harry would have taken them to the Ministry of Magic next to turn in the gold form, but he decided to wait a month. That way, they would be back in school and away from reporters when it all became public knowledge. Instead, Harry Apparated them to the steps of Gringotts.

"Why are we here, Harry?" Ginny asked as they walked in.

Harry led her to the door that said, "Dept. of Last Wills and Testaments". "We need to add you to my official documents, and Gorbag in here has been most helpful to me in the past."

Indeed, Gorbag was delighted to add Ginny to Harry's Last Will, and he created a simple one for her that gave all of her things to Harry, then her family if something happened to him too. Gorbag also added her name to the access list for the Potter family vault and said she could go inside now. That confirmed for Harry why Griphook had not set foot in the vault on his first visit, and it also made Harry glad he had not used the Black Family key to take her straight there.

Ginny enjoyed the long ride in the goblin car, but she was nervous when Harry told her to open the door. "Go ahead Ginny, just walk up and touch the door. This is a good test to make sure it will recognize you." As she gathered her nerve and touched the door, it's many locks unbolted and the door noisily swung open. She was glad Harry was there to steady her. Ginny was sure that much gold could not exist, yet here it was in front of her.

"So what do you think of your rogue now, Ginny?" Harry asked her.

She wanted to make a joke like, "You should be glad the goblin is here Harry, otherwise, I might just shag you on top of that pile of gold," but she was not sure Harry would take it as a joke; she was afraid he might think she could be bought. Instead, she simply said, "Wow..."

He chuckled at her. "See that pedestal over there?" He pointed it out. "That goes with the Black Family key. So we can come here anytime we want if we need more money." Pulling out his money bag, he refilled it with Galleons. Getting another from the goblin who had taken them down here, he filled it up and handed it to her. "Shall we go shopping in Diagon Alley too?" he asked with a smile. Harry also grabbed a few paper notes before they left, in case they bought anything very expensive.

Harry did a few glamours to both of them during the ride back up. From there, they shopped for the rest of the afternoon. They even saw several people they knew, but by saying nothing, their friends did not recognize them. Other than some new robes and a few other clothes, Ginny did not really buy anything. Harry only bought one item, and it was for Ginny: a new Firebolt. She was ecstatic.

As dinnertime approached, they and their shrunk purchases Portkeyed to the Black foyer. Ready for anything, they walked into the rest of the house. It was incredibly quiet, no one was found on the first floor. Looking at each other, they decided to descend into the basement to look in the kitchen. When they opened that door, they found everyone who was staying at the house, plus Remus Lupin. The look on Ginny's mother's face caused Harry to gather his magic just in case he needed to quickly do a wandless shield.

"Where have you two been?!" she thundered as her wand came up.  
"Accio --"

Harry quickly waved his hand.

"-- Ginny!" To the surprise of Mrs. Weasley, nothing happened.

Harry sighed and did his best to be polite to his new in-laws. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Weasley, but I can't let you do that. If you're still angry, we'll leave and return when you're more calm."

Arthur did not want them to leave, so he reached out and grabbed his wife's wand from her. She looked at him in shock, but he ignored her silent protest. "Is anyone else upset enough to do anything? If so, please hand me your wand as I'd like to talk to them." He looked to each of his boys. "Bill?"

"No Dad, I'm more curious than anything."

Arthur turned to the twins. "Fred? George?"

"No problem from us Dad..."

"We're happy for them."

The father nodded and turned to the last son present. "Ron?"

Ron eyed his best friend and sister for a moment. "I think I'm fine Dad," then he pulled out his wand and handed it over, "but just in case."

Arthur took Ron's wand, added his to the collection, and put all three on the counter over near the door and sat back down. The three Grangers, Fleur, and Remus all sat and watched in curiosity.

"Now," Arthur said, "Molly's temper aside, I thought she had a very good question. Where have you two been all weekend?"

"Paris," Ginny answered. "It's a little warm, but otherwise very lovely this time of year."

Her mother restarted her interrogation, "What were you doing in Paris, young lady?"

"We were married," Harry calmly answered. "We wanted to be proper about it all to make you happy."

Molly was shocked into silence as her fears were confirmed. Her husband did not look much better. The elder Grangers looked surprised. Ron looked slightly angry. Hermione and Fleur looked like they had just read a happy story, while Bill and Remus looked amused. The Potters just stood there waiting to see what would happen. When nothing seemed to be happening, Harry waved his hand again and took his shield down.

"Is that your ring?" Hermione asked pointing to Ginny's left hand.

"Yes," the bride said happily and showed it off. Hermione and Fleur came over to the doorway to look. Both sighed and proclaimed it good.

"Harry? Why did you go to Paris?" Hermione asked.

He did not have to answer as someone else did. "Because, there they can get married now," Fleur answered. "I am zu'prised you listened to me."

"You?!" Molly roared. "You gave them this idea?"

"No, no. I only zaid the age for marriage in France is zixteen. I did not zay they should go get married," the French girl defended herself. Molly did not seem to care for the distinction and still blamed Bill's bride-to-be. The glare extended to Bill as well, but her oldest son ignored the look. Hermione looked to Harry and Ginny and smirked as she gave them a wink since her back was turned to Mrs. Weasley.

Trying to get out of the awkward moment, Harry spoke up. "So, may we join you for dinner? Or shall we just go pack Ginny's trunk and leave?"

Arthur decided he needed to make sure the dialog continued. "Come on in and join us," he said with resignation. "I think we need to know about what you have planned and perhaps a few other things."

Harry and Ginny came in, though they both sat on the other side of the table from her mother. Mrs. Granger and Hermione served dinner as Molly did not trust herself with her wand yet.

As Hermione and Ron quickly set the table, Arthur asked, "I presume both of you will stay at your house, Harry?"

"Yes, sir. It is the safest place for both of us." He did not bother to point out that now he could make sure Ginny was always safe, he assumed they would realize that.

"I hope that's only for the summer. What about in September?" the father asked.

"We'll both return to school. Ginny will finish her classes, though her load will be much lighter than most students as she's already finished her Charms, Transfiguration, and Defense classes. The Headmaster has offered to let me continue the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts as a full professor. We'll have our own suite there."

"Really? I didn't know that," Ginny told him. "When did you find out?"

"At my birthday party" Harry told his wife. "I didn't ask him about us specifically, but I asked him about quarters for full professors. He mentioned you could stay there too if we married before you finished your last year." She looked a bit put out that he had not told her sooner.

The food was now on the table so everyone started helping themselves.

"So Ginny, why did you two get married this weekend?" her mother asked as they all started eating.

Ginny decided to have a little fun. "In some ways, I was just following your example, Mum. You were married less than month after you finished Hogwarts, and I've already finished over half my courses."

Molly sputtered, "Ginevra! You ... I ... That's not a good reason!"

Ginny mentally smiled at her answer and her mother's response. She was not really worried, they were married and Harry would continue to defend her. The only real problem is that she knew her mother was going to be make it a long evening, and she was right. It was late before the newlyweds returned to Potter Manor with all of Ginny's things in her trunk. The end result had been worth it: they had forced her mother to accept them as a couple.

(Fri 22 Aug)

Harry and Ginny Flooed to Grimmauld Place at ten in the morning. Ron and Hermione were ready and waiting for them for a group shopping spree. They would be at Hogwarts in ten days and needed their school supplies.

"Hey, it should be great mate," Ron told Harry. "I checked around and a lot of our friends hadn't been shopping yet, so they're going to join us."

Harry raised an eyebrow at that. "Did you tell them I was coming?"

"No, just that Ginny might be there," his brother-in-law said. The other three closed their eyes, Ginny actually groaned.

"Ron!" his girlfriend lit into him. "That's the same thing as saying Harry will be there. When has Harry not been with Ginny since last Christmas? When have they never been to the same social event? Hmm?"

Ron looked down very contrite. "Sorry. I do promise not to mention you're married though."

"That would be a good thing, Ron," Harry said with some frustration in his voice. "If you let that out before we announce it, I swear that you and Hermione will have to adopt if you want kids." Ron cringed at the thought. Harry just could not figure Ron out. He was a great friend, and actually fairly intelligent, at least when he wanted to be; but he had so much trouble holding his tongue. Wanting to be sure they would be safe, Harry checked both his and Ginny's hand for the fourth time that morning; there were no visible rings on either of them.

"Everyone got their lists?" Hermione asked, trying to get them back on track. When everyone, except for Harry who did not have one, said yes, she pulled her cloak closed around her reddish dragon hide coat. She had been skeptical about it at first: that was until Harry hit her with a Stunner and she did not fall over. A slightly woozy feeling had come over her, but she was still conscious and able to function. Hermione also was not sure about wearing the boots, but when she had put them on, the reaction from Ron convinced her. He had told her that she looked hot. That had warmed her in more ways than one. In fact, she had snogged him senseless a few minutes later.

The other three, also decked out in red dragon hide from shoulder to toe, followed her through the Floo to the Leaky Cauldron, then through the short passageway to Diagon Alley.

To Ron's chagrin, they went to the book shop first. Harry always stayed near Ginny. Even if they were both in disguise, as light brunettes today, Harry still wanted to be near her. He picked out a few books on older magic styles to see what he could pick up from them. Hermione then let them stop by Quality Quidditch Supplies. While Ron ogled all the brooms, Harry and Ginny picked up some broom servicing supplies.

By the time they dragged Ron out of that shop, it was nearly lunchtime, so they headed back to the Leaky Cauldron. They had seen enough friends, and talked them into lunch too, that they took a private back room for an impromptu lunch party. Harry was a bit put out that everyone knew he was there, but he was pleased by the fact that no one used his name. There was always a nudge or a "Hey" to



get his attention. As they left lunch, they all agreed on ice cream at three.

Though Ron grumbled, the girls both delighted in getting potion supplies, new quills and parchment, along with a multitude of various ink colors. Just because she could, Ginny bought a box of twelve different ink colors. Ron rolled his eyes at that one, but Harry just grinned. He was not going to deny his mate something that trivial that made her so happy.

Madam Malkin's shop was last on the list. To Ron's dismay, he had grown a little more and had to get new robes. Harry had not grown up, but his chest had filled out. Fortunately, the robe styles allowed for that and he was fine. Hermione and Ginny were in the same boat as Harry, though their chests had grown for different reasons. Though they did not have to buy anything, Harry saw the two girls giggling while they looked at something in the back of the store. Ginny did her best to hide it while she purchased it, but Harry was sure he'd find out later what it was. If it was what he thought it was, the only question was how long she would actually wear it.

A little before three, the foursome went to the outdoor patio of Florean Fortescue's Ice Cream Parlour and pulled some tables and chairs together for their friends. The first one to show up was a friend they had not seen earlier.

"Neville, what's up mate?" Harry asked as his friend walked up. He also put his finger to his lips as his friend started to speak.

"Ha-, uh, hey!" Neville said as he understood Harry's point. "Sorry I couldn't be here earlier. Uncle Algie had me trying to heal a few plants."

"No problem," Harry told him as he smiled. "And nice coat there, at least what I can see of it peeking through the cracks of your cloak."

His friend smiled. "Thanks! In more ways than one." They all laughed. "Uncle Algie was very impressed with it. You got all of your shopping done already?" The four nodded. "Damn! I guess I'll have to go do my alone then."

"Stay and have a bit of ice cream first," Ron told his dorm mate. "Lots of sugar here to help you shop faster." Neville chuckled at that. Other friends started coming up and sitting down, the sudden influx gave the Ice Cream Parlour a nice little profit for the afternoon.

Neville finished his ice cream and excused himself to go next door for some supplies. As he did so, a red-haired man walked up and stood in front of them.

"Ginny?" asked softly, "Is that you?"

She looked up, "Percy? What are you doing here?"

"I'm shopping for a ring. Penelope and I have come to an understanding," her brother told her.

"That's nice Percy," Ginny told him with no emotion in her voice, as she wondered why they were having this conversation. It was the first time he had spoken to her since he had stormed out of the house nearly two years ago.

"Ginny, I'm trying to make amends with mother and father. Can I ask your forgiveness too?" her brother asked sincerely.

She looked at him steadily and he did not look away. Turning, she saw Ron was talking with some friends and had not noticed Percy's presence. "What about your other brothers?"

"I've already started talking with Bill." Noticing her glance, Percy said, "I'll talk with each one in time, I just saw you first, though your different hair color did give me pause."

"What about Harry and your disbelief of him?" Ginny asked with a hint of anger.

"I'm sorry about that too, and I'll tell him when I see him." Percy saw her glance at the boy without glasses who was holding her hand. He did not know who the boy was, but he could tell Ginny seemed to care a lot about him. He was surprised it was not Harry, given his

sister's known long time desire, but the boy did not have a lightening bolt scar.

Ginny finally looked back up at her errant brother. "I can forgive you eventually, but I need a little time to adjust. Can you give me some time?"

Percy smiled. "Yes, Ginny. After understanding my mistakes, I can see the need to think things through before words are said."

She looked up at him and smiled for the first time. He was still the same old formal Percy, yet, he had apparently learned a few lessons during his two-year estrangement from his family.

As Ginny was about to reply, screams started coming from down the alley. Harry looked up and saw at least ten Death Eaters firing spells. Knowing all of the friends around him were in the DA, he called out to them, "Everyone be very careful and dodge the curses. Let's go!"

Percy recognized that voice, "Harry?" That could not have been Harry, the boy had no scar. Percy could not ask now, the boy and his sister had already left.

The resistance of the people the Death Eaters first targeted was non-existent, then Harry and his friends arrived. The tide quickly turned. Unfortunately, there were another fifteen Death Eaters behind the first group, and Harry saw the Dark Lord himself on the steps of Gringotts launching spells against the closed doors of the bank trying to get in. Next to Him were the three Death Eaters Harry most wanted to get his hands on, but they would have to wait.

Temporarily free from fighting as the first group of Death Eaters went down, being surprised by real resistance, Harry sent a Patronus message to Dumbledore and another to Shacklebolt. Next, he erected an Anti-Portkey ward for the whole area, and finally put up an Anti-Disapparation ward for the whole area too. He really wanted to capture these "people".

That last action was felt by the bald man-like monster on the steps of Gringotts, and caused him to turn around and look at the fighting

behind him. He sent the two men with him down to join the melee, while the woman stood there to guard his back. The red-eyed monster continued his assault on the bank doors. He needed money because all of his accounts and those of his biggest supporters had been frozen, and this was the best place to get a lot of it.

There were almost enough DA members present to occupy every Death Eater, so Harry did his best to ignore them and walked towards the bank to meet his destiny. Ginny walked with him to guard his back.

"That's not much of a disguise, baby Potter," the woman next to Voldemort said.

At the mention of that name, Voldemort turned around. "Well, Bella, I do believe you are correct. I suppose I shall have to delay my bank withdrawal. You may have his friend first, Bella, but don't kill her because I want to get to know her again. I can feel my mark on her somehow."

A new voice entered the conversation from the side. "Don't bother yourself Ginny, I'll take care of Bellatrix myself." Neville shrugged off his cloak, his wand was in his hand.

"Back for more little Longbottom. We had so much fun playing hide and seek in your green houses," the female Death Eater said. Neville responded by firing a Stunner.

Harry shrugged off his cloak as he jumped away from Ginny, they needed to be at right angles to Voldemort. She was moving the other way and firing, Harry was pleased.

In fact, he was very pleased with how the fight was going. Voldemort had yet to hit him with a spell after more than a minute of fighting, while Harry had kept the monster pinned down against the bank doors and casting mostly defensive spells. He and Ginny were moving well. His only concern was for anyone who was behind him as he had to dodge Killing Curses. He hoped no one innocent was hit by those stray shots.

Just as Harry had scored a severe Cutting Curse on Voldemort's leg, he was blindsided by a bludgeoning-like curse. The only fortunate thing he could think of was most of the impact had been on his left arm. As bad as it hurt, Harry rolled to his right and turned to see who had hit him. There stood Lucius Malfoy, bruised and battered, but still fighting. Harry heard the slow satisfied drawl of, "Avada," the beginning of the Killing Curse. With a simple but hurried "Accio!", Harry summoned a nearby Death Eater body lying on the ground to use as a shield.

Harry did his best to ignore the pain in his arm as he worked to get the body/shield into position, all the while hoping he did not get caught in a cross-fire between Malfoy and Voldemort. As the extra body arrived, an old man in billowing purple robes with a long white beard flashed in while holding onto the tail feathers of a phoenix. The old man landed right next to Harry and looked down at him, smiling that he had come in time to help. In horror, Harry watched Malfoy move his wand just slightly as he said "Kedavra". The sickly green curse hit the newcomer in the back instead of hitting Harry, and Harry watched Albus Dumbledore crumble to the ground beside him. The phoenix wailed instead of trilled, momentarily stopping all action in its presence.

When the wail finished, Harry looked right into the eyes of Lucius Malfoy. With an anger reserved for very few for a senseless murder, Harry pointed his wand at the blond man and cast, "Accio Malfoy!" The surprised Death Eater started flying at Harry, who ducked and cast "Sendan!" banishing the flying man away from Harry and towards Voldemort.

Turning to see what was going to happen, Harry was horrified to see Voldemort send a Killing Curse at Ginny while she was lying on the ground, the fight apparently not going well with only her fighting it. He was also horrified to see the sacrifice of her brother, who had worked his way beside her, and threw himself in front of her. Both he and Ginny could not believe Percy's Gryffindor courage had taken that moment to fully show itself.

As Malfoy flew into Voldemort and knocked him down, Harry took that brief moment to poke his wand inside his coat to heal his broken left

arm. He knew there was more wrong with his body, but that relieved most of the pain in his arm and gave him some movement back; he only had all the pain in his shoulder now. From his kneeling position, Harry sent a Severing Curse at Voldemort to keep him busy while Harry stood back up. Harry was not sure whether to be happy or sad that Malfoy took that moment to try to stand back up, so he took the curse across the back of his neck. He flopped forward never to rise again; Harry's personal promise to Luna was now fulfilled, even if it was an accident.

Voldemort knew this was not going to end well if the battle continued on as it was; he needed to change the context of the battle. As Malfoy flopped down beside him, he searched for another shield. Bellatrix was still very busy with the other boy. From the information he had received, he knew the girl meant something to Potter; so he decided to take her. "Accio Ginny!"

Harry could not believe that Voldemort was summoning Ginny. He sent a stunner at the Dark Lord, knowing it would get there first, but Voldemort dodged it before he grabbed Ginny from the air, holding her around her waist.

"Go ahead Potter, curse me now!" Voldemort laughed. Ginny continued to struggle and grabbed the monster's hand to pry it off of her. Voldemort screamed in pain and tried to pull his hand away.

Memories from five years ago came back to Harry. "Hold onto his hand Ginny, don't let go of his hand." Voldemort continued to scream and try to rid himself of the girl and the pain, but she hung on for dear life. Harry noticed Voldemort was not changing to dust as Quirrell did, but whatever was happening because of Ginny was very distracting to the Dark Lord.

Running to save his new wife, Harry locked eyes with Tom Riddle, and then he did something he had not originally planned on, he cast, "Legilimens!" to further distract Riddle. There were strong shields preventing Harry from entering Riddle's mind, but Harry could tell that his presence as he tried to break the mental shields caused further pain to the monster. Remembering what Dumbledore had told him a year ago, Harry tried to project all his feelings of love for his friends,

his surrogate family, and finally his wife. As his love for Ginny battered at Tom Riddle's shields, Harry heard a scream in both his ears and his mind.

Voldemort still would not die though. Harry needed one more thing to complete the task. While part of his mind thought of and projected his love, another part searched for what to do. As Harry finally came to Ginny and Tom Riddle, one of Tom's hands lashed out at Harry, hitting him in the chest. While the pain was minimal, Harry felt something pressing into him. That triggered another memory from Dumbledore. Harry reached inside his coat and grabbed his Potter Family key. With a lunge, he thrust it forward and touched it to Tom's face. The scream of agony doubled and Harry's world exploded.

Ginny was thankful she had been looking at Harry during the last few seconds of the fight. As he reached out with the Family key, she heard a noise and felt stuff hit the back of her head and coat. The front of Harry was now covered in red, and what must be blood. She felt Voldemort falling behind her and his hold on her non-existent. As she looked, she wanted to throw up when she realized he no longer had a head and when the realization of what all the stuff that was covering her and Harry was.

Harry fell to the ground too and she rushed to him. He was still alive, but he was struggling to breathe. Something else was not right as he seemed to twitch slightly as if he was having a seizure, but she did not know what was wrong. After opening his coat, Ginny cast a diagnostic spell on him, all she could find was a number of injuries on his left side, none of them life threatening.

A scream came from her right. Ginny looked up to see a bloody Bellatrix grasping her left arm, as a Reducto hit her in the body. She flew back and hit the bank doors before bouncing to the ground. A tired and bruised Neville walked up to her and spat on her. "That's for my parents," Ginny heard him say venomously.

"Ginny, are you and Harry all right?"

She looked up in the other direction to see Kingsley Shacklebolt standing over her. "Kingsley, he's hurt and I don't know what's wrong with him!"

The Auror reached down and jerked one of Voldemort's shoes off and tapped it with his wand so it glowed blue for a few seconds. "Grab Harry's arm tightly, now take this shoe."

She grabbed the shoe from the man, and felt the familiar pull of a Portkey. When they landed, she saw that the two of them were in the entrance hall of St. Mungo's. "Help!" she screamed, "I need help!"

A Healer and a nurse who had been walking down the hall rushed over to her. "What's the problem?"

"He's been injured in a battle against Death Eaters and I don't know what's wrong with him!"

"Let's get him into a room and look," the Healer said. As he levitated Harry and started moving him, he saw two other healers who had stopped to gawk at the sudden appearance of the two bloody teens. Raising his voice he ordered, "Michael, Bruce, follow me. You too Terri," he told the nurse as Harry was taken into a room. He levitated Harry to the bed. "First thing we have to do is to get this coat off of him, it's blocking my diagnostic spells."

As the first Healer started to open up Harry's coat, Ginny yelled, "Wait! Show me your forearms, all of you!" They looked at her like she was crazy. "I said, show me your forearms before you touch him." She pointed her wand at each of them, careful to be in a position they could not get control over her. When they just stared at her, she threatened, "If you don't show them to me, I'll Vanish your sleeves."

"Hey," the healer on the left said, "you can't do that."

With a flick of her wand in an upside "v" motion, that healer was suddenly wearing a sleeveless tunic. "Anyone else want to question what I'm capable of?"

"We're only trying to help," the second healer said.



"Then show me your forearms and I'll let you help him." Ginny did not back down from her demand.

"You said you had been battling Death Eaters?" the first healer asked. Ginny nodded. "Then I suppose I can understand. Everyone roll up your sleeves." He pulled his up and showed clean forearms. The nurse was clean as well. The third healer turned his bare arms around and they were clean.

The second healer just stood there. "This is ridiculous," he said.

"You're just feeding her paranoia, Bruce. Show her so we can get on with it," the first healer urged him.

The reluctant healer pulled up his right sleeve, and as he went to pull up his left one, he lunged at Ginny; but she had been ready for it and cast, "Stupefy!" He fell at her feet.

With a wand motion, Ginny moved his left sleeve back to show a clean forearm. She tied him up and levitated him over to the corner. "He's either a sympathizer or really stupid, either way, I will not have him working on my husband. You three may start."

The first healer shook his head, but started to work. "First thing is to take this coat off of him. While I lift, you two carefully pull it off." He levitated Harry for the other two to help. "My name is Pete, what's yours?" He thought he'd see if he could calm her down; her reaction time on that Stunner had been phenomenal, not that Bruce had not primed her to be ready.

"Ginny."

"Careful with that arm Terri. All right Ginny, you say this is your husband. What's his name?" Pete asked her.

"Harry."

"Nice solid name. Good, lay the coat over there Michael." Pete slowly lowered Harry back to the table and started doing diagnostic spells. "There are glamours in the way, I need to remove those so I can see

the real problems." He cast "Finite Incantatem" on several places. Harry's hair went back to black, his nose narrowed, and his wedding ring reappeared.

Trying again, Pete started reciting what he found. "Looks like a recently healed left arm that hasn't had the proper time to set. There's also some bone damage around the socket and the two top ribs are also cracked. A little bit of internal bleeding, but not very much. I can't see underneath his boots, but his legs are otherwise all right. For fighting a Death Eater, he's actually in pretty good shape."

"I think he took out three, but I'm not sure, I was busy myself," Ginny said as she watched them carefully.

"Three? Then he's very good. Michael, take care of the internal bleeding then the ribs, I'm going to work on this shoulder and arm. Terri, we need a Blood Replenishing potion and a Strengthening potion; then start cleaning him up," Pete directed. He was doing his best to be calm. Pete liked to work in a calm room, but this young woman was not yet calm.

"He's the best," Ginny said with some pride. "None of those injuries are from Death Eaters, at least not directly. Malfoy blind-sided him when he was fighting Voldemort."

All three of the medical staff looked at her. "He was fighting You-Know-Who?" the younger healer asked in amazement.

"Yes. Is he going to be all right?"

Pete Vanished Harry's shirt and started working on the shoulder. Between spells, he told her, "Yes, he'll be fine in a little while. The damage really isn't that bad. As soon as we get him close to normal, he should wake up."

"At least he's stopped twitching," Ginny commented.

"He was? I didn't see that when I first saw him. What was he doing?"

"His head and neck were jerking," she told him. The nurse had finished giving Harry the potions and was using a special mild cleaning spell to remove all the blood, bits of Voldemort, and dirt from Harry's skin and hair. Ginny decided she might as well become normal too, so she became a redhead again and her rings became visible. She also tried to clean herself up with several cleaning spells, though she was sure she had missed a few places.

"I think rest and a little more Blood Replenishing potion, Pete," Healer Michael told him as he stepped back, finished with his work. The nurse had finished with hers and Harry looked normal. Healer Pete was still directing his wand over Harry's shoulder.

"Wait a minute," Healer Michael said. "You said he was fighting Death Eaters, You-Know-Who, and his name is Harry. Is this Harry Potter?"

"Yes," Ginny admitted. All three of them again stopped what they were doing and looked at her. "What? You thought it was possible to kill Voldemort and not get hurt?"

Michael's voice rose several notes as he asked, "He killed him, too?"

"Yes, the bastard is gone for good."

They all smiled, "Well, that brightens the day tremendously," Healer Pete said, as the door burst open.

"Healer Mallory!" the nurse exclaimed. Ginny whirled, crouched, and banished the nurse back out into the hallway all in one motion. She then flicked the door shut and sealed it.

"I can't believe I didn't secure the door to begin with, sloppy of me," Ginny said. "Harry would be so disappointed."

The healer thought he had just gotten the young woman calm when that had happened. "Uh, Ginny, she was looking for me. I am Pete Mallory, and I am in charge of this ward."

"I'm sorry, Healer Mallory, but I'm still feeling a bit twitchy right now. I'm still very much on edge from the fighting. The only important question is: How is Harry?"

"Well, I believe we're all done. He just needs time to rest and a few more potions to help him recover faster."

"Then why isn't he awake?" Ginny asked.

The healer continued to try to calm her down, again. "Because he's exhausted."

Ginny thought about that, but something did not seem right about that. "Wake him up so I can see he's all right, then I'll open the door back up. Sorry, but he had to give everything for everyone else, they can all wait for a few more minutes."

Pete thought that was a bit cold, but then again, he really had no idea what it had taken to defeat You-Know-Who; and Harry was a real hero. "Very well. Enervate." But Harry did not wake up. He twitched a few times then went still again. Pete started doing more diagnostic spells. "I don't understand. I can't find anything wrong, yet I don't know why he just did that."

There was something about the last few seconds of the battle that seemed important to her. Trying to think back, she remembered getting summoned, the struggle to get away, Harry coming to rescue her, him looking at Tom and for a long time, then the Family key and Tom's head exploding, which caused both of them fell down. What happened to Harry? she wondered. Harry was looking at Tom just before Tom died, looking intently...

"Healer Mallory? What happens to a person who is using Legilimency on a person when they die?" Ginny asked.

"I, I don't know." He looked to Michael who shrugged back.

"We need a mind healer," Ginny told them. "Wait, Harry already knows one. Damn! What is his name? It's easy like yours, uh, Paul -- Paul something."

"Paul MacDonald?"

"Yes! Yes! That's it! Get him, quick!"

"Healer MacDonald is one of the best in England, he rarely works on cases like this," Pete explained.

"He will help Harry, they already know each other." Ginny unsealed the door. "Go!" she told Healer Michael. "Tell him Harry has been injured by Voldemort and needs his help." When the young healer just stood there, she again told him, "Go! Harry needs help now!"

Pete nodded at the door. "Go ahead and try, though I doubt he will come."

As the door opened, there was a crowd a people outside, some of which were Aurors. "Surrender and you will not be hurt," she was told.

"Let this healer come out, he needs to find Healer Paul MacDonald," Ginny called out.

"Ginny?"

She recognized that voice. "Kingsley! Quick, get Paul MacDonald. Harry needs him."

"Right. The emergency is over everyone, we know what's going on. Everyone back to your own business," Shacklebolt called out. "Watkins? You and Perkins stand guard here at his door. No one goes in unless I or that young lady inside OK's it. And don't make her angry or you'll regret it." The black Auror left to go find a Floo to help the young woman who could probably kick his arse now.

A nurse nervously looked at the Aurors guarding the door. She hoped she could stand out in the hall and get a message in. "Healer Mallory? They were looking for you a few minutes ago."

"What is it?" he asked walking to the doorway.

"I was just told it doesn't matter anymore, but Healer Calhoun collapsed a moment before you went in that room. He was holding his arm and there was a big black mark there. They were hoping you could save him, but he didn't make it," she said sadly.

"A mark that looked like a snake head?" Ginny asked.

"Yes, how did you know?" the nurse in the hall asked.

"Because that's what a Dark Mark looks like. He was a Death Eater."

Healer Mallory looked at the young woman. "I now see you do have a reason for your vigilance."

She grinned at him. "'Constant vigilance,' a friend of mine would say."

"You know Alastor Moody?" he asked.

"A friend of mine who helped us with our training occasionally. How do you know him?" Ginny asked.

Pete laughed. "I've fixed him up a few times. You say you're married to Harry. How long have you been married? You don't look old enough, at least to me."

Ginny looked lovingly at her rings as she held up her left hand. "I've had my wedding ring for one week as of today." She looked at Harry. "And I want my husband back."

"I understand, Ginny. We'll do our best." Turning around he said, "Terri? Why don't you apply some of your cleaning spells to Ginny, then you may go. I'll stay here with Mr. Potter. I wonder what we should do with Bruce over here?" Terri waved her wand over Ginny, especially over her long hair in the back.

Thinking for a moment while she was being cleaned up, Ginny finally said, "Leave him for now, he's not going anywhere." Ginny heard a noise out in the hall and turned to look out the door.

Kingsley Shacklebolt walked in with an older man. "Ginny Weasley, please meet Healer Paul MacDonald."

"Miss Weasley, it's a pleasure. Harry had told me so much about you during our training sessions."

"Thank you Healer MacDonald, though now, it's Ginny Potter." Kingsley looked at her in surprise and she held up her left hand to show off her rings.

The old healer smiled and chuckled. "I wondered how long that would take. He seemed pretty smitten with you when we last talked. Now, what is it you think I can help with? Healer Mallory here is known to be quite good at his art."

Ginny looked to Mallory to explain. "Healer MacDonald. Mr. Potter is healed physically, but he won't wake up. When I tried to wake him, he merely twitched. Then Mrs. Potter asked what happens when a person is doing Legilimency on a person who dies? I believe she suspects that to be the case here."

"I see. Let me have a look." MacDonald waved his wand around Harry's head a few times. "Hmm, nothing too out of the ordinary, but there are ways to search deeper." He placed his hands on the side of Harry's head and used his thumbs to force Harry's eyelids open. The healer peered intently into Harry's eyes for nearly half a minute before he jerked back and exclaimed, "Great heavens!"

"What is it?" Ginny asked excitedly.

"He's under attack, mentally -- very dark magic. Everyone stand back." The old healer started waving his wand and chanting.

Ginny did not know what language he was using, but she watched and waited, practically holding her breath. After nearly two minutes, Harry's body spasmed and then he lay still. The healer stopped chanting and returned to peer back into Harry's eyes. When he straightened back up this time, he smiled. Waving his wand one more time, he cast, "Enervate." This time, Harry's eyes fluttered and he took a gaspy but deep breath.

"Harry?" Ginny called as she leaned over him. She saw him look to her. "Oh Harry..." she felt tears come to her eyes as she hugged him and felt him return her hug.

"It's OK Ginny, I'm back," he whispered. "I'm back and Tom is gone for good."

"Mrs. Potter?" Ginny turned to Healer MacDonald. "I would suggest we let him sleep for a while, overnight if at all possible. In fact, I would suggest a Dreamless Sleep Potion so he won't wake up until tomorrow morning. He can go home then, if Healer Mallory agrees."

"That sounds like a good plan to me," Mallory agreed.

"Is it safe?" Harry whispered.

"Right, safety is an issue. I suppose I can ward a room shut so no one can get in," Ginny said.

"Ginny, that should not be necessary," Kingsley told her. "It appears that when Voldemort died, all of the Death Eaters died with him. There was something in their Dark Mark, snake poison we think, that killed them all a few minutes later. We have yet to find any Death Eaters alive, so you should be safe."

"What about him?" Ginny pointed to the trussed up healer on the floor. "He tried to attack me when I asked him to show me his forearms, though I didn't find a Dark Mark on him. He is still alive."

"Let me see," MacDonald said. He knelt down next to the tied up healer and looked intently into the man's eyes for a couple of minutes before he stood back up. "He's not a Death Eater, but he was put under an Imperius Curse to kill Harry if he should show up. Someone named Calhoun did it to him. Kingsley, I think you should take custody of him so he can get the proper help."

Kingsley took charge in his usual no-nonsense way. "Right. Let's get Harry moved to a better place. Ginny can ward the door as she sees fit. I'll have two Aurors outside his door at all times until he leaves."



The plan was carried out, and ten minutes later, Ginny had multiple wards, including a blood ward over the door. It was going to be just her and Harry in the room until eight tomorrow morning. No reporters, no questionable people, not even family. She would not even allow healers and nurses unless Harry really needed them. Kingsley promised to get a hold of her parents so they would know what was happening.

Ginny crawled into Harry's hospital bed with him, the potion phial in hand. She wanted a Dreamless Sleep Potion too, but resisted, as someone needed to be able to wake up quickly in case of an emergency. The weight of the death of her semi-recovered brother was starting to hit her, as was the knowledge of Professor Dumbledore's death. Harry's close brush with death as Tom Riddle had tried to possess him one last time did not help as it brought back unwanted memories of her first year at school.

Harry drank the potion and told her, "I love you Ginny."

"I love you too Harry." She gently kissed him as he quickly drifted off to sleep. Ginny laid her head on his shoulder and cried herself to sleep.

## Chapter 19: Epilogue - Part 1

(Sat 23 Aug 1997)

Harry woke a little before eight. He felt his wife snuggling against him, so he did his best not to move. The thought of Ginny as his wife still amazed him; the last week had been spectacular -- unlike the hell he had been in for nearly an hour yesterday. The time of Tom trying to possess him, to kick Harry out of his body so Tom could have it, was beyond description. Only Ginny's love had kept the Dark Lord at bay, until he had forced the evil soul out. The spell by Healer MacDonald had distracted Tom long enough for Harry to be successful. He had no idea what he was going to do for Paul MacDonald as a Thank You, but he was going to try to do something special for the healer.

He now realized how foolish it had been to do mental battle with Tom. He should have avoided that and just used the Potter Family key as the final weapon. Without the mental link that Harry had established, Tom would not have been able to try the final possession.

As he looked over Ginny, with her lovely hair cascading over both of them, there was a knock on the door. The noise instantly woke Ginny. She checked to make sure the door was closed and that her wards were undisturbed. The next place she looked was at Harry, where she saw him smiling at her.

Ginny stretched up and gave him a quick kiss. "Morning, love."

"Morning, Ginny."

The knock came again. With a small annoyed look on her face, she got up, and in her borrowed hospital pyjamas, she walked over to the door. "Who is it?"

"It's your mother, Ginny. It's a little after eight and the healers want to check Harry."

She looked back at Harry, and by the look he was giving her, she knew the door would not be opening soon if he had any say in the matter. Liking the way he was looking at her, she replied, "Uh, right."

Let us take a shower and I'll open the door in about half an hour or so."

"Ginny, you shouldn't keep these people waiting."

"Mum, if they can't hear me now, tell them that his wife would like to remind them that he killed Voldemort and all the remaining Death Eaters. Therefore, allowing him a little extra time to get up and take a shower is not too much to ask. Don't bother trying to open the door yourself, or at least consult Bill about the wards Harry used at Christmas first. I'm silencing the door; we'll be out soon." Ginny put an Imperturbable Charm on the door and returned to her husband. "Shall we go take a shower?"

"I think you need someone to wash your hair for you," he told her with a grin as he got up.

It was nearly forty-five minutes later before a clean and more relaxed Harry and Ginny in clothes cleaned with Scourgify spells opened the door to their room. There was a small crowd of people there, most of them Weasleys, though Kingsley, Remus, Hermione, and Neville were there too.

Healer Pete Mallory was the first to say "Good morning". The rest of his friends and family did too, and they had grins on their faces as well. "Why don't I go first and then I'll leave you to your family? Mr. Potter, if we can go back in. You're welcome to join us too, Mrs. Potter."

Moony held out some clean clothes and a scratched dragon hide coat. "Here Harry, you might want these. I got the clothes from your house. Winky gave me some for Ginny, too." The Potters took those and went back into the room.

After a quick checkup, Healer Mallory pronounced him fit and ready to leave at his convenience. The Potters got dressed in new clean clothes, with their red dragon hide outfits on. Again they came out of the room.

Looking around, Harry saw eight Weasleys, even Charlie had come home for this. "It's good to see everyone here. I assume no one here had any major injuries?"

"No, all of us got pretty lucky, Harry," Moony told him. "There were some casualties, I'm sorry to report."

"Who?" Harry asked. He knew this was going to hurt, but he had to know. As the Weasley parents hung their heads, he could guess who the first person on the list would be.

"Did you see Percy?"

"Yes, I saw him sacrifice himself for Ginny. In fact, his sacrifice created a protection for Ginny and caused a lot of pain to Voldemort." Harry received several surprised looks at that announcement. "I also know Dumbledore died when he arrived next to me. Lucius never gave Dumbledore a chance to defend himself. Who else?"

"Lucius always was cold-blooded," Moony told him. "In the DA, Ernie Macmillan, Dean Thomas, Dennis Creevey, and Cho Chang did not survive. There was also one Auror who died, a Theodore Darrion." He paused and no one said anything for a few moments. "I'm sorry Harry, I know those hurt, but one could say those were really very small losses. A big reason for that was because there were so few Death Eaters. The Anti-Dark-Mark Law had significantly thinned their ranks and made recruiting harder." Several people wondered why he had added that last part.

"I see," Harry said heavily and lowered himself into a chair with the others in the hallway. He looked down the corridor and saw several Aurors. "I understand having someone outside my room, but why is the whole corridor blocked off?"

Kingsley answered. "While mostly for you, the rest of the DA members who had to stay overnight are in these other rooms. We felt it easiest and best to protect all of you this way. There are a lot of reporters outside."

"Harry?" Moony looked at his student. "As much as you probably don't want to do this, it would be a good idea to give a very short press conference before you go home. There have been some questions about whether you survived."

"You should probably read this before you do that, Harry," Hermione advised. She handed him this morning's Daily Prophet. It was all about the battle. There was some question as to whether Voldemort was really dead, but the most astonishing part was Minister Scrimgeour's comments taking credit for almost everything. The only thing the Minister did not take credit for was the final deed, and for that, the Minister created "Harry Potter Day" to be celebrated on the 22nd of August each year.

Harry just shook his head after he had skimmed the entire front page. Ginny was quite upset. As Harry was trying to decide what to do next, the Aurors at the end of the corridor shouted "Halt!"

Everyone turned to look, and there stood a goblin. Harry recognized him. "Kingsley, tell them to let Griphook through. I know and trust him."

"Simpson, let him through," Kingsley commanded, and the goblin walked to Harry.

"Hello Griphook. I'm surprised to see you here."

"Mr. Potter, we are pleased you have recovered. I was instructed to bring you and your mate this." The goblin reached into his coat jacket and pulled out a rolled parchment and handed it over.

Harry took it and untied the ribbon around it. Opening it, he and Ginny both read:

Mr. and Mrs. Potter,

We at Gringotts wish to thank you for your efforts which defended our institution. While we understand that you may have had another goal in mind, we respect the result you accomplished. There are two things we would like to discuss with you. As you have always been

respectful of us, we wish to discuss with you ways for Goblins and Wizards to resolve our differences. In addition, we have accounts for a Tom Riddle and several other members of his tribe who have no heirs. We would like to reward you with those accounts, minus some fees. Please come by to speak with me at your convenience about these matters.

Sincerely,  
Grinnel Gringott

Both Harry and Ginny were amazed. "Bill, would you give me your opinion on this?" He handed the parchment to Ginny's oldest brother. While he was reading, Harry turned to the Goblin. "Griphook? Do you know the approximate total value of the accounts mentioned?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter. The total of all nine vaults is a little less than thirty million Galleons." Harry was shocked, but considered that probably included the Malfoy vault as well. "The fees mentioned will be ten percent."

Bill handed the parchment back. "That's quite a prize, Harry, and they are offering you a very unique opportunity. This may be the chance to prevent more Wizard-Goblin wars for many years to come. Also, you should frame that letter. I've worked at Gringotts for over ten years now, and that's the first time I've ever seen his signature," he said with a grin.

Harry addressed the goblin. "Griphook, if you please, pass on a message. Please tell Mr. Gringott that I would be happy to come meet with him next, ah, Tuesday afternoon at one. Also, for now, please place the reward in a separate vault. I will make arrangements with him to give that money to victims of the war."

"That's very generous of you, Harry," Arthur told him. "I'm not sure how to do that fairly, but I like the idea."

"Harry, be aware that you will receive some pushback from the Ministry about that. From their point of view, abandoned money belongs to the Ministry for their use. That being said, I like your idea and I think there are ways to get around that view as it's only a policy

and not really law. The most obvious is for you to accept the 'gift' from Gringotts personally, and then donate the money from your account. The hard part will be the accounting issue so it does not look like abandoned money," Kingsley advised.

"Do you understand how those policies work, Griphook?" Harry asked the goblin.

"Yes, Mr. Potter. What Auror Shacklebolt suggests is wise and we can make it happen."

"Very good; I would like that," Harry said. "If you would get that started, I'll sign whatever I need to when I come in next week. Does that sound good Ginny?" She agreed. The goblin gave a slight bow and left.

"Well, I'm hungry for breakfast," Harry told them, and Ginny agreed. "Moony, would you volunteer to go tell the reporters I'll be there in about fifteen minutes for a short statement. Please tell them they must behave, and no flashes on the cameras. They can take pictures if they want, but if a single flash goes off, I'll immediately leave." He did not want to think spells might be coming at them. "After that, I propose we all go back to Headquarters for breakfast." Ron was in agreement for that plan.

As Remus left, Harry and Ginny stopped by each room in the wing and said thank you to each of the DA members that had been severely hurt. Harry was glad everyone would fully recover. He decided right then, that the Victim's Fund would pay for all of these hospital bills. His friends deserved at least that for putting their lives on the line.

After they finished saying thank you to their injured friends, they made their way to the area Moony showed them. When they came to the last door, Moony stopped them. "Both of you, remember to think very carefully before you speak. Remember how Rita Skeeter could twist the most innocent of comments. I'll be nearby and will cover your backs when you leave. You can come back to here and use your Manor key to get home. Good luck!"

Harry took a deep breath and looked at Ginny. She nodded and they walked out the door into a large room hand-in-hand. There were a large number of cameras taking pictures, but not a single flash was going off. They walked up to a lectern, and questions started being shouted at them.

With a sigh, Harry held up his hand and amazingly it quickly got quiet. "Good morning everyone. I have a short statement to make. Three things I'd like to mention, then I plan to leave as we've yet to have breakfast. First, I can officially announce that Tom Riddle, who called himself 'Lord Voldemort', is dead and will never return."

"How do you know that Mr. Potter?" someone shouted out.

Harry ignored it. "Yesterday, some of my friends and I were shopping in Diagon Alley when Tom Riddle and his Death Eaters came to attack Gringotts. We attacked the Death Eaters to hold them there until Aurors could come and take them away. In the process, Ginny and I fought Tom Riddle. In the end, I was able to kill his body, and while he attacked me mentally as well, Tom was pushed out of this plane of existence. As the one who had to fight him, I can tell you without a doubt that he is gone, never more to return. Many of you have labeled me the 'Chosen One'. It is not a label I've ever accepted, but now that the war is over, I can reveal to you that there was a Prophecy that stated if Tom Riddle was to be killed, I would be the one to do it."

There were many gasps at that, as well as some other questions which Harry ignored and held up his hand again so he could speak. "One final thing I will say about the battle in specific, and the war in general. A number of wonderful people, some innocent bystanders, were wounded and even killed -- including a number of Muggles. Whatever honors you may try to give me, such as this holiday, please also give these people respect and honor for their sacrifice for us -- a sacrifice that we might all live better lives. I know I will miss my friends and family who were killed in this war."

Harry took a deep breath to try to calm himself. The sadness of the losses threatened to overwhelm him, but he knew he needed to continue. "Second, I read in the Daily Prophet this morning that the



Ministry of Magic wants to take credit for ending the war, even creating a 'Harry Potter Day'. Personally speaking, I would prefer there be no 'Harry Potter Day'." That caused a lot of murmurs. "I would prefer there be a Rememberence Day for those lost in the war."

He saw Ginny smile at him for that. "In addition, I would ask you, the press, to carefully verify any claims made by the Ministry in regards to what they say they have done to end the war. Don't take any vague statements. Make them specify what they did, then verify it. I do know the Ministry passed the Anti-Dark-Mark Law, and that was instrumental in thinning the ranks of the Death Eaters. They also gave priority to the MLE so the Aurors could fight the Death Eaters better. Beyond that, I don't know what else to give them credit for. They may have done other things, I challenge you to verify those claims."

"Mr. Potter..." someone shouted.

Harry ignored the voice. "Finally, we have an opportunity for something very wonderful now that the war is over: Unity. Many of the magical creatures came together to fight Tom Riddle. I ask and urge everyone to consider how each of us can work to make this level of cooperation continue. I especially direct this request to the Ministry of Magic, that they will reach out to the Goblins, the Centaurs, the House Elves, the Vampires, and the Werewolves. Perhaps after we have a united Magical World, we can even reach out to the Muggles in some limited fashion one day. I hope we can use this time of peace wisely."

He paused, and deciding that was enough; he was getting very hungry. "I think that's plenty from me for now. If you'll excuse us, we do need to find breakfast. There is also family we need to spend time with after our losses from yesterday."

As they turned away, a female reporter on the front row shouted, "Mr. Potter! Who is the young woman with you?"

Harry looked at Ginny and whispered, "Now?"

"Sure Harry," she whispered back. "It'll be something Ron won't have to worry about keeping secret anymore."

He grinned at her as he turned back around. Raising his voice, he announced, "One bonus announcement. For those who want to know, with me is Ginny Potter, my new wife." The cameras really started clicking. "We were married last week in Paris. She is the former Ginny Weasley, daughter of Arthur and Molly Weasley. And as happy as I am that the war is over, I'm happier still to be married to Ginny. We both look forward to many wonderful years together, and children in a few years."

They turned and left, ignoring all further questions, back through the door, Harry grabbed the Black key while Ginny grabbed him in a hug. Harry looked at Moony and said, "We'll see everyone back at Headquarters." He touched his wand to it and they were gone. Harry and Ginny started breakfast for everyone, because after the press conference, Arthur and Molly had a difficult time getting to the Floo points. The reporters kept asking about their daughter and Harry's marriage. Their children had to help them get through the crowd of people.

Over breakfast, they started discussing what would happen. It was the Potters, the Weasleys, the Grangers, and Remus. Tonks came by to join them, too. Kingsley had to work and could not make it. Neville had also left for his Great Uncle's house.

Harry got everyone's attention. "Hey, I've got some announcements."

"What, you're having children now?" Ron asked. Ginny whacked him on the shoulder, but he did not let up. "You ran away and got married, what's the next special announcement? Kids!" He got a good laugh and two more whacks, one from Ginny and one from Hermione.

"Funny, Ron," and amazingly enough, Harry was chuckling. "I know everyone has been dying to know where I live; I'll now let you know." That got him some very interested looks. "Some of you may know that there is an ancestral Potter Manor. If you tell your owl to take a letter to us at Potter Manor in Wales, the owl should be able to find us."

Please keep that to yourself. I will not lift the Fidelius charm there, but after breakfast, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, and Hermione, I will share the secret with you and you can come visit."

"Hey, what about us?" the twins said in unison.

"I don't know," Harry said with a grin. "What do you think, Ginny?"

"Depends on how much sucking up they do, Harry," his wife replied. Everyone laughed at that, even Fred and George.

"We have an announcement too," Arthur said. "As of today, we Weasleys will be moving back to The Burrow. There were lots of cheers for that.

"My turn, if I may," Mr. Granger spoke up when the cheering died down. "We will be leaving as soon as we can find a new house, so probably in a few weeks. We're even going to get it added to the Floo Network. We want to thank each and every one of you for treating us so well, as if we were family. You've also taught us a lot about our daughter's world, and for that we're very appreciative. Thank you, Harry, both for a place to live, and for rescuing us last Christmas." Mrs. Granger came over and gave him a hug.

"Well, in that case, as soon as this house is empty again, I think it needs a new owner. Remus?" Harry looked at the werewolf. "You've been spending a lot of time with that girl next to you, and one could say that the house should go to her anyway. So are you going to do anything with her, so I can give both of you this house? It would make a great present, if you know what I mean."

Remus looked very embarrassed and did not know what to say. Tonks was not embarrassed, but she looked over at Remus with a questioning smile and batted her eyes at him. "So Remus, Harry wants to give a house to us. What do you think about that?"

He finally looked up at her. "We, uh, we can talk about that, Tonks," he finally got out.

"OK, go ahead, I'm ready," she told him.

"Not now," Remus retorted. Everyone else laughed.

As everyone finished breakfast, Harry showed Ron, Hermione, Arthur, and Molly a slip of parchment with the secret to his house on it so the Fidelius charm would allow them through. Going to the fireplace, he said, "Potter Manor in Wales" and went through. Ginny came out next, as well as his four new guests. Harry opened the door and let them in. He decided not to add them to the access list on the door. No need to have in-laws just walking in the front door. They could knock, he decided; house elves were good about answering doors.

Because everyone kept stopping to look at everything in detail, it took over an hour for the tour of the home. It would have been a lot longer, but Harry promised Hermione she could come back to the library later.

Harry had Winky start lunch for them all. They talked and had fun until lunch was ready. Arthur held Harry back for a moment as everyone else went to eat.

Arthur was very serious looking as he told his son-in-law, "Harry, while I'm still not very happy about you and Ginny running off and getting married, I do appreciate you loving her and getting married before children come along. I can tell you're able to meet all of her needs, but I will caution you not to spoil her too much."

"I understand, and you're welcome, Mr. Weasley."

"Why don't you make it Dad; and I'm sure Molly will want to be called Mum."

"Thanks -- Dad, I like that."

Arthur still was not sure what to think about his youngest getting married first, but it was obvious Harry loved her greatly.  
(Mon 25 Aug 1997)

While Ginny was finishing getting dressed, Harry was reading the Daily Prophet as he started eating breakfast. The celebrations over Voldemort's downfall had started to wind down, though the

occasional party that needed Auror intervention to Obliviate a Muggle who saw too much was still a daily occurrence. On the bottom of the front page, he read where the Minister for Magic was being questioned very carefully about some of his statements, so it seemed that Harry's plea was having an effect, at least for now. He hoped it would last a while, but he was not optimistic.

As he started on his bacon, Dobby came in to the little dining room off the kitchen. "Master Harry, Headmistress McGonagall wishes to speak to you in the Floo."

Harry sighed at the inconvenience of a large house and the inability to transfer Floo calls. He did not feel like walking to the foyer. "Please find out her location and tell her I'll call her in moment from another fireplace."

Dobby left with the message, and returned in a minute with the information. Harry walked into the kitchen and with some Floo powder called, "Headmistress' Office at Hogwarts". His head was soon spinning through the network, and he saw Professor McGonagall in her new office. "Headmistress?" Harry called out.

"Ah, Mr. Potter, thank you for talking to me so quickly. I was wondering if I could have an hour or so of your time this morning. I know Professor Dumbledore made arrangements with you for this next year, but apparently some details are not in order," she told him.

"Class does start in a week, so I suppose we do need to take care of the details," Harry told her.

"Excellent, please drop by anytime this morning, I shall be here the whole time. Also, please bring your wife with you, she should be interested in what I have to say as well."

"Uh, right. We should be there in about an hour," Harry guessed.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter. I'll see you then."

Harry pulled his head out to see Ginny looking at him. "Mum need something?" she asked.

"No, that was actually Professor McGonagall. She wanted to settle some details about my teaching and wanted me to come see her this morning." He smiled at her. "And for some reason, she wants you come with me. She thought you should be interested."

"That sounds unusual," Ginny said as they made their way to the breakfast table. "Any idea what it might be?"

"None whatsoever. It can't be a teaching offer, because you haven't finished school yet." Harry shrugged and went back to his breakfast.

A little more than an hour later, Harry and Ginny Flooed to the Headmistress' office. McGonagall was by herself going through paperwork. Harry found the office a bit different. There was an extra portrait on the wall, but he seemed to be asleep at the moment. Fawkes' perch was gone, as were all the little silver instruments. All the Horcrux objects were on display on a new shelf.

"Mr. and Mrs. Potter, I'm glad you could come on such short notice. As I have not had the chance to tell you yet, congratulations on your marriage. It was a surprise to me, but I suppose I should never be surprised by anything you two do. You are unique."

"Thank you, professor," Ginny replied. She hoped McGonagall meant unique in a good way.

"Since we are colleagues, may I call you Harry?" She got a nod. "Feel free to call me Minerva, though I'm sure that will be a bit strange to you for a while. Mrs. Potter, I would like to extend the same courtesy to you, as I do to all teachers' spouses, though I will ask you to do that in private only as you are also still a student."

"Of course, Professor, though I may rarely do that. It's a habit, you understand," Ginny explained.

The Headmistress smiled. "I do. The transition from student to adult is not always easy. For you two, it is both harder and easier as not all of the standard rules apply. For example, your position this year

Harry, will be as a full professor as you are now 'of age'. The normal rule of waiting at least five years after graduation before teaching here has been waived due to your exceptional experience and circumstances."

"Thank you, Headmistress."

"Ginny, when you graduate in two years, you will have an offer here waiting for you as well, if you want to teach. The experience waiver covers you too."

"Thank you, Headmistress. I don't know what I want to do when I graduate," Ginny said, "but if my husband wants to continue teaching, that will influence me greatly."

The normally stern-looking witch gave a slight smile. "Then it will be in my best interest to make both of you like being here. Will you come with me? I have something to show you." She stood and they followed her out the office.

"Harry, as a full professor, I would like to ask you not to take any classes this year. If you would like to continue to pursue your Herbology NEWT, I would request you have Mr. Longbottom or Professor Sprout tutor you privately throughout the year. You can take the test next June, even privately, if you wish."

"I assume that's because you would prefer us not living in Gryffindor Tower?" Harry asked.

"That is part of it, but the main reason is that full professors do not take classes. Generally, you are too busy to do so. Your class format allows you to, but I would still prefer you do not."

Harry considered that. He had been taking Herbology only to stay in the Tower last year; still, after putting in six years of work on a subject, it seemed a shame to give up now in the last year. "Very well, Headmistress. I'll discuss tutoring with Neville. I don't foresee that to be a problem."

"Excellent," McGonagall told him as she led them down a corridor they had never been down before. Stopping at a door, she touched her wand to it and it opened. "You could stay here," she told them as she led them in.

Harry and Ginny looked around the small apartment-like place. There were unaware such suites existed in Hogwarts. It had three bedrooms and was quite spacious next to the room Harry stayed in last year, although not as spacious as their master bedroom suite at Potter Manor. Ginny looked out the windows. They had an excellent view of the Quidditch pitch and stadium, as well as the grounds near the main front doors.

Minerva led them back out and down the hall. "Of course, there are other empty quarters, if those are not adequate, but I would think they would do for now. You have an extra bedroom for a study, and an extra bedroom for a nursery in three or four years, or whenever you're ready."

Ginny blushed slightly at that. Harry managed to avoid blushing by watching some of the ghosts cross the corridor up ahead. "I think those would hold us for quite some time," Harry finally said.

"That's good," Minerva casually told them. "Of course, you might also consider these too." She opened another door and led them in.

This suite was even bigger, and it looked slightly familiar to Harry too. He looked at Ginny, and he could tell she was having similar thoughts. "I know I've been here before, but I can't quite place it..."

"A number of times Harry, these are my old quarters," the Headmistress told him. "I finished moving out yesterday. Would you like to have them?"

Harry stood completely still as he looked at her. "But, these are here because they are near Gryffindor Tower."

"Yes, through some magic with Portals, it has multiple entrances and exits as you need. This is another reason for you to be a full professor and not a student, Harry." Minerva seemed to start



pleading. "I need you to be the Gryffindor Head of House." As his shocked look continued, she tried to explain. "You see, Harry, there are presently only three Gryffindors on staff for this next year, and I'm Headmistress. So if you do not take this position, I will have to ask Hagrid to do so."

Ginny gasped, then started giggling. At the glare from the Headmistress, she quickly stopped.

McGonagall's face softened a bit and she sighed. "My apologies Ginny. That was my frustration. In many ways, your reaction is quite appropriate. And Harry, I am also quite desperate. Will you please take this position?"

This was almost like the Prophecy he considered. It was something that had to be done and he had almost no choice but to take part. "Ginny will be able to join me for meals at the Head table?" Harry asked.

"It will be a bit unusual," the Headmistress conceded, "but I don't see why not. You may also take some meals here, but I need you in the Great Hall for most of the meals. For some meals, such as the various Feasts, handing out of the timetables, and so on, your presence will be required."

"I understand," Harry told her.

"Excellent. You may move in as soon as you wish over this week. As a full professor, you do have one more benefit that you did not have last year. Milly?"

A house elf popped in. "Yes, Headmistress?"

"Milly, this is Harry and Ginny Potter. They will be living in this suite this year," McGonagall told the elf.

The elf turned to the Potters and curtsied. "Welcome Mr. Potter, Mrs. Potter. You may call me at anytime if you need anything."

Harry turned to Ginny, "I don't think we should tell Hermione about this."

"Indeed," Ginny agreed, "but Milly can be a big help when we want dinner here." Ginny smiled as she thought about what could be done here this coming year. Decorating her way could be very fun.  
(Sat 30 Aug 1997)

Harry sat in the small audience watching Bill and Fleur get married. He did have to admit that Fleur caught his eye in her shimmering white robes. However, it was Ginny that held his eye in her shimmering dark silver dress. He had to hand it to Fleur. While the bride's maid dresses were modest enough to satisfy Mrs. Weasley, barely, Harry thought the dress showed Ginny's curves very nicely. Apparently, some of Fleur's cousins thought so too, as he'd seen them looking at her. He was not worried though, Ginny had been watching him the entire time, and he would be standing at her side the moment the ceremony was over.

As the reception started, Ginny was holding onto his arm everywhere they went. None of the French cousins stayed near, especially after Fleur had introduced them. The name of Harry Potter caused them to keep their distance, and for the first time in his life, Harry was glad he was famous.

Nearly halfway through the reception, Bill found them by themselves for a few minutes. "So Ginny, I know you're glad you're married, but are you sorry you missed something like this because you eloped?"

Ginny shrugged. "I suppose, yes and no. Every girl wants a wedding, but I did have one and I have pictures to prove it. But Bill, something I realized some time ago is that life with Harry will never be normal."

"Are you all right with that, Ginny?" Harry asked her.

"Yes, I am. I don't know that I'm really normal either." Harry raised an eyebrow and she laughed before she continued. "Really, Harry. I'm the seventh child and the only girl. While fate hasn't handed me the raw deal you got, I don't think I'm like most other girls."

"I'll agree with that," Bill said with a smile. "I still can't believe you're the youngest and you still got married first."

Ginny teased him with, "Well Bill, you could have been married a lot sooner if you had picked out your wife when you were ten, like I picked out Harry six years ago." Though Harry blushed at that, he laughed with the other two.

Suddenly a shriek and laughter came from the area where all food was. Turning to look, Bill saw the bride's train had been transfigured into a dragon tail, complete with scales and spikes. He chuckled as he told his sister and husband, "If you'll excuse me, I need to go rescue my wife from the twins." Then they saw the new bride pull out her wand and the Veela in her took over. "On second thought, perhaps I need to go save the twins from my wife."

Bill headed over, leaving a laughing Harry and Ginny, who each needed the other to stay standing they were both laughing so hard. It was only made worse as Mrs. Weasley started going after Fred and George with her wand drawn.

When he could talk again, Harry turned to his wife. "Are you sorry you didn't get something like this at your wedding Ginny?"

She smiled, "Not a bit, Harry, not a bit."  
(Mon 1 Sep 1997)

Harry rode the Hogwarts Express to get to school. He and Ginny could have Apparated or Flooed there, as he was a teacher; but Ginny had wanted to ride the train to talk with friends. While it was a good way to spread the news they were married, Harry's fame got in the way again.

The Welcoming feast did not look like it was going to be much better. As Harry and Ginny sat down to the immediate right of the Headmistress at the Head table for the first time, Harry noticed that Minister for Magic Scrimgeour was there at the Head table too. To the Potter's surprise, all the Weasleys and a number of other parents

where also there. They were sitting at the long tables with their children.

It all started reasonably normally: they had the Hat's song, the Sorting, and the Feast. About the only real difference was that it was Headmistress McGonagall who gave the usual announcements, such as the Forbidden Forest being forbidden. After that, all normalcy flew out the window.

"As I'm sure everyone can see," the Headmistress told them, "we have a number of guests here tonight. The Minister for Magic wanted to hold a big ceremony for this, but I convinced him that was not necessary. Still, I do agree with him that when Hogwarts students show why we have the finest school in Britain, those students should be recognized. Therefore, we will have a ceremony here in recognition of those students who put the Wizarding world first and themselves last."

She nodded to the Minister, who got up and went down to floor level. "I would like the following students to come to the front to receive the Order of Merlin, Third Class, for fighting in the Final Battle in Diagon Alley." Harry counted twenty-one names. There were four more he had expected, and yet, did not hear. Those twenty-one students came up, received their award and got their photo taken with the Minister, then at the end, also received a loud applause.

As those students returned to their seats and hugs from their families, the Headmistress called a new set forward. "I would like the parents of Ernie Macmillan, Dean Thomas, Dennis Creevey, and Cho Chang to come forward please." Three sets of parents and a single Asian woman came forward. Harry was surprised to note that Cho's father wasn't present. He wondered what had happened, if maybe he had been killed earlier in the war, or if he had died from other causes.

"We are eternally grateful for your childrens' service in helping to fight evil. We know this award will not bring them back, however, we hope this Order of Merlin, Second Class, will help you to know how honoured we are by their actions -- their willingness to give their life that others might live." Professor McGonagall had a hard time saying

that, and the emotion in her voice was felt by everyone in the hall. These four also had a loud applause.

As they sat down, Minerva McGonagall looked over the crowd of people and gave a small smile. These next awards were the ones she wanted to see most, and she knew the crowd felt the same way. "While there have been a few other Order of Merlins given to a few Aurors and some special citizens, such as a Second Class award to Percy Weasley and also to our late Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore, we are honoured, to have the reason for the end of the war, to come from this student body."

The Minister came back up to the dais upon which the Head table sat, though he stood to the side of the Headmistress.

"The reason the war is over is because one young man took responsibility to spend countless hours, over more than a year, training himself and training others to fight the war. That effort included months, of many more hours, of training someone to help him. Together, these two fought and defeated the worst Dark Wizard in recent history. Please come and accept the Order of Merlin, First Class: Harry and Ginny Potter." Professor McGonagall started the applause, and everyone else rose to join her standing in honour of the two finest warriors at Hogwarts.

Harry supposed it could have been worse. At least he only saw one reporter and one photographer. He suspect that limited number, the location of the ceremony, and the fact that it was the Headmistress and not the Minister that led the ceremony, was all due to Minerva McGonagall. That raised his respect and admiration of her abilities immensely, and his respect for her was already quite high. Looking over at Ginny, he saw her give a slight shrug and stand; he stood with her. Together they walked around the Head tables to the front of the dais to accept their awards.

When they received the awards, he noticed the Minister was quick to stand between them with an arm around their shoulders while the photo was taken. After that, the Headmistress pulled them over to the center of the dais and whispered to him, "Please say a few words, Harry."

After nearly a minute of applause, the clapping and whistling died down and people sat again. Harry had noticed that even the Slytherins had joined in, though not as hardy as the others. He leaned over to Ginny and whispered, "Do you want to say anything?" She smiled and shook her head no. "Chicken," he whispered. She just continued to smile at him and the crowd.

Clearing his throat, Harry addressed the Great Hall. "While we would like to thank the Ministry and the Headmistress for these awards, we hope that no one forgets those who literally gave their all to this cause. Cho, Dean, Dennis, and Ernie are the first on my list, though there were many Aurors and innocent people killed too, such as my parents and Ginny's brother Percy, whom some of you knew. We truly wish none of them had had to die. That also includes one of the last to fall in the Final Battle: Albus Dumbledore."

"Albus Dumbledore was a wizard I respected greatly. While I did not agree with everything he did, without him, this war would not have ended as early as it did, and his personal sacrifice during the battle helped our side to win. Please remember him, too."

"Lastly, and yet most importantly to me personally, is my training partner and, for those of you who haven't heard, my wife, Ginny." That got an applause and caused the new bride to blush. "Without her, I'm sure we would not have been successful; and I am quite sure, I would not be nearly as happy as I am right now. Thank you."

As they moved to their seats, Harry and Ginny received another standing ovation. He was very glad there would not be any more of these, or if there were, he did not plan to go. A look at Ginny showed her to have similar thoughts, or so he guessed by the forced smile on her face.

## Chapter 20: Epilogue - Part 2

(Wed 1 Sep 1999)

Harry and Ginny sat down at the Head table, joining most of the other professors, and waited for the students to enter the Great Hall. It was not long until the older students entered, and then Professor Flitwick, who was shorter than all the incoming students, came in leading the first years. They watched the Sorting Ceremony with fond memories.

Headmistress McGonagall had barely told everyone to "Tuck in", when one of the oldest witches Harry knew entered the hall. The Headmistress hurried down to greet Head Examiner Griselda Marchbanks. Those who knew her were extremely curious as to why she was here in September. After a few moments, the two witches went up to the Head table, with Professor Marchbanks taking the first empty chair she could find.

Harry leaned over to his wife. "Got any idea why she's here?"

Actually, Ginny had an excellent idea, but she was not sure if she wanted to tell her husband. "I'm sure we'll find out, Minerva has been very good about telling us everything we've asked about in the staff meetings." Harry grunted and continued eating, while also keeping an eye on the Gryffindor table.

"It was good to see Luna this afternoon, wasn't it?" Ginny commented while they ate dessert.

"Yes it was," Harry agreed. "We almost had a normal conversation, even if all her sentences were short."

Ginny sighed. "Normal for fifth year, but she's not the old Luna who talked about fun animals. Nor is she the Luna who could make such insightful comments at the most embarrassing times," she said with a smile.

"True, but at least she has a chance at a semi-normal life thanks to Healer MacDonald."

The Headmistress stood and dismissed the students at the end of the Feast, then she leaned over to her Defense teacher on her right. "Harry, would you and your wife please join me in my office?"

Harry raised an eyebrow in question, but Minerva gave her classic twitch of a smile before she walked over to Professor Marchbanks to escort her through the halls. He turned to his wife and told her, "We'll find out in a few minutes why she's here, we're supposed to follow Minerva to her office."

Ginny nodded and got up to walk with her husband. She was quite sure this meeting had nothing to do with the positions she now held in her first year on staff, and for which she had been introduced to the students less than an hour ago. No, this had nothing to do with her being the new Flying instructor now that Madam Hooch had left, nor with her being the DADA teacher for those in first or second year, nor with her being the professor for Charms for the first through third years. It was almost certainly in regards to the letter she had sent the Head Examiner -- a letter she had hoped she would get a reply to in similar manner, not with a personal visit. She just hoped Harry was not too displeased with her.

The four of them entered the Headmistress' office and made themselves comfortable. While the Headmistress started, it was obvious she was deferring to the Head Examiner. "Professor Marchbanks, you said you had some interesting news for us?"

"Yes, I do, Minerva. First, Professor Potter, or perhaps I should say Professor Mrs. Potter, welcome to the world of education."

"Thank you, Professor Marchbanks," the young woman told her.

"You sent me a question, and I am afraid I can not answer it." Minerva and Harry looked at the old witch wondering what that was about, Ginny just looked down. "Or perhaps I should say I can not officially answer it, hence, why I did not write you back. But I will answer your question as it pertains to the real reason I'm here," she said with a smile.

Ginny joined the other two in looking at Marchbanks.



"Your husband scored one hundred and twenty-eight percent on his test, while you scored one hundred and twelve percent. Ignoring the bonus questions, he made a perfect score on his test, while you missed one question. I found it interesting that it was on werewolves. Do you not have a friend who is one? A former Professor Lupin?" The old woman continued to smile.

Ginny was not sure what to say and looked at her husband. "I'm sorry Harry, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings on this, I just wanted to know how I did in comparison to you."

Harry smiled and reached out to grabbed her hand. "It's all right Ginny, I'm not bothered at all. And if you had done better, I'd still be happy for you."

"You would?" Ginny started to brighten. She had been so afraid he would be so upset with her for trying to outdo him on the Defense test.

"Sure, you're my wife and I always want you to do your best. Of course, I think our next conversation with Remus is going to be very fun," he told her with a grin.

"No, Harry, you wouldn't. Would you?" she was embarrassed by her missed question.

"Of course I would, unless you can persuade me not to," he told her with a large grin.

Ginny instantly understood what he was saying. A quick glance to the two older women showed her very interested smiles. "Uh..."

"We can talk about this later, we shouldn't bore Professors McGonagall and Marchbanks with that conversation." Harry kept the grin on his face.

Ginny knew boredom would not describe that conversation. The reason not to have it now was to prevent either of the two older witches from having a heart attack or a stroke, though she suspected the two older professors knew exactly what Harry was alluding to, as

they had been young once. On the other hand, this situation was not necessarily bad. The last time she had something like this to hold over Harry, she had gotten several wonderful dates and a weekend in Dublin out of it. "Of course, dear. You mentioned you had other news for us, Professor Marchbanks?"

Griselda Marchbanks seemed to chuckle under her breath. "Because we have had a perfect score, and the near perfect score would have caused this too, it seems that the understanding of Defense Against the Dark Arts is advancing. Another data point is that the average score on this test is now an Exceed Expectations. That tells us we need to revise the test to keep up with the current state of the art, as it were. The test needs to get harder. Since you two are now professors in the subject, and you two are the ones who made the high scores, we would like your input and help in devising the new test. We would have followed our policy to do this last year, but we, as a board, decided to wait one extra year as we wanted to see what score Mrs. Potter made, in order to compare it to you, Mr. Potter."

"Seriously?" Harry asked. The examiner nodded. "If I can ask, since it's a policy to update the test, when was the last time it was updated?"

"We make very slight changes to it every year, so the questions cannot be memorized by the students and given to the next year, but the last major revision and change happened approximately one hundred and forty years ago. That was triggered by a near-perfect score by one Albus Dumbledore," she informed them with a smile.

Harry chuckled at that, while Ginny and Minerva had huge smiles on their faces. "That's fitting, I suppose," he said when he could. "How soon do you need this done, Professor?"

Marchbanks pulled a small but thick sheaf of papers out of her robes and handed it over to the young man, which he enlarged to normal size. "This is a copy of the master of the test, with its many optional parts that we switch around from year to year. We would like a new version of this by the beginning of the next term, which I believe is on the 3rd of January."

"It is," McGonagall agreed.

"Very well, we can do that. I assume you'll take our input and then make whatever changes you feel appropriate?" Harry asked.

"Yes, we will," the head examiner agreed. "Please guard that most carefully. Even though it will be replaced, much of the subject does not change and I would not be surprised to see a good portion of the new version to be like the old version. However, please feel free to change and add what you like. We will take it all as a strong recommendation."

"I understand," Harry said. Ginny agreed too.

"Very well then. Please contact me when you have something for the Examination Board. If you don't mind, I'd like to have a few minutes with Minerva here," Marchbanks pleasantly told them.

"Thank you for answering my question," Ginny told the old witch as she stood. Harry gave a small bow and the couple left.

As they walked back to their quarters, Ginny told Harry with a chuckle, "You know what Ron would have given year before last to hold that stack of papers you have in your hand, before he had to take his NEWTs?"

"Plenty. But imagine what what Hermione would say if she knew you and I were making the new test?" Harry laughed at that.

"We should invite them over for dinner and tease them with it," Ginny suggested.

"I doubt they're free. They just got back from their honeymoon, and Ron is about to start his second season for the Cannons. You know, we really do need to get some tickets from him for one of his games."

Ginny looked at her husband. "Are you serious? It's the Cannons. We want tickets for two good teams."

"Yeah, but how about when the Cannons play a good team. It will be a short game, but then we'll have time to go out afterward with them." Harry looked ahead and saw a prefect standing at their door, looking for him, obviously.

"What do you need, Mr. Tuttle?" Harry called out. The prefect stopped knocking at the door to find his Head of House walking up behind him, a professor who was only four years older than he was.

It took Harry only a few minutes to answer the questions before the prefect went back to the Tower to straighten things out. He looked at his wife as she sat on the couch thumbing through the huge copy of the Defense test Professor Marchbanks had given them. "Ginny, I know that in some sense we have nearly one hundred and fifty kids with all those in Gryffindor Tower, but what do you think about having a few with the last name of Potter in a few years?"

She looked at him in surprise. "What brought that thought on, dear?"

"Don't know," he said. "Maybe I'm just growing up and getting old enough to care."

Ginny snorted. "Right. You just turned nineteen, Harry."

"I'm not saying I want you pregnant right now, so please keep on the potion. But I'm starting to warm to the idea. You know, maybe in two or three years," he suggested.

She stood and walked over to him and put her arms around him. "Is that the price of your silence to Moony?"

"No way! For that, I'm thinking you need to plan a long weekend on the French Riviera for us over Christmas. I think four or five days in the warm sun at that time of the year would probably keep me silent, at least as long as I see the plans for the trip in the next week," he told her with a smirk.

"Uh, huh," she drawled.

"Yeah, I want some time to just lie in the sun, but also don't forget to plan some fun things too. Feel free to make it a whole week if you want," Harry told her.

Ginny pulled herself up and kissed him. "The things I do for you. So, how many kids do you want, Harry? I know you once told me you wanted enough to make sure the Potter name didn't die out, but how many is that really?"

"Don't know Gin, how about we just figure it out when we get there? When we get tired of having new babies in the house, we'll stop."

"Harry, you know I've always wanted a large family. Are you sure about that?" she asked.

"I think so, but we have time to discuss it. Like I said, I'm not ready for you to get pregnant tonight, although..." Harry reached down and grabbed her behind the legs and back; she shrieked as he picked her up and then started walking towards the bedroom. "We could practice a little tonight..."

(Mon 24 Dec 2012)

Ginny was gently pushing Emily back and forth in her rolling bassinet as she watched her husband pull more presents out of a bag and enlarge them before he put them under the Christmas tree. Harry was almost acting like a little kid as he laid out all the presents and arranged them. Perhaps part of the reason was the sheer number of presents he was taking care of. Ginny had not bothered to count, but there were probably over fifty of them.

"Harry," she softly called to him from the couch.

"Yes, love," he answered as he expanded a training broom for one of their children, she was not sure which.

"I think I'm ready to stop."

"Stop what, dear?"

"I'm ready to stop having new babies for Christmas. I think Emily should be the last one."

Harry quit pulling presents out and dropped the bag in his hand. He walked over to her and knelt before her. "Really? Are you sure? We can have more if you want."

She nodded. "Really. I think anyone would call twelve children a large family. I mean, we even had to have two other suites attached to our quarters to have enough bedrooms, and as Headmaster, you have the largest quarters in the whole castle. You have seven boys to carry on the family name, as well as five girls to dote over; and you have a fat wife now."

He smiled at her. "I'll agree with everything you said except for the last part. Yes, you still have a little baby weight, but you've always gone back down to almost your original size. In fact, I don't know how you do it."

A sigh escaped her. "I work hard at it, but it also gets harder each time. I don't know that I'm going to get much smaller than this," she said with a pout.

Her husband pulled her into a hug. "And if you never lose another pound, I'll still be happy with you and think you're the prettiest woman I could have. So you're one size bigger all over..."

"Try three, Harry..." she retorted with some exasperation.

"OK, three. You carry it well, and some of it looks good on your too." He started to slide his hands up her body.

"Ut, uh, Harry. Don't touch those or I'll start leaking. It's almost time to feed Emily. Besides, all that weight didn't go to just that one spot."

Harry sighed. "Look Ginny, give it a little more time and I'm sure you'll be fine, but I meant what said. I'll happily love you just the way you are." She did not say anything. "Maybe we just need to get you out of our quarters more. Are you ready to go back to teaching Defense? Maybe that would help some."

"Yes, I suppose I'm ready to start teaching again. You're right that dueling with the students will keep me on my toes."

"It will, and look what it did to Hermione while she and I covered for you. I think she said she lost some weight. I guess Ron will have to start chasing her around the castle now."

Ginny laughed. Hermione seemed to prefer the more sedentary life that teaching Transfiguration allowed, while Ron seemed to like the outdoors that Care of Magical Creatures required. He had taken over Hagrid's position after a Quidditch injury, and when the half-giant had wanted to move to France and get married. She was still not sure how her best friend had convinced her brother to stop at two children, though Hermione adored every one of Ginny's.

"You know, maybe I'll start going back to the Manor for an hour every morning. We still have all that exercise equipment there," she thought out loud.

"I don't see why not. I could come join you if you like. Working out could help me too." Harry slapped his stomach a couple of times.

Ginny giggled. Harry was still as thin as ever at thirty-five and he still had most of his build from when he was eighteen. She suspected he snuck off to the Room of Requirement and worked out there still, but she was not sure. "I think not, Harry, at least not at first. Let me get to be just one size too big, then you can join me."

"All right," he agreed. "Why don't you feed Emily while I finish with the presents? When you're done, we can go to bed and work on the brother Emily will never have," he told her with a teasing grin and a quick kiss.

"Har-ry! You're incorrigible," she told him.

"Perhaps, but the real problem is that I find you irresistible."

Ginny's heart beat wildly as she considered what a wonderful husband she had. She would show him what she could still do as soon as her daughter was fed and put to bed.

(Tue 25 May 2083)

James Harry Potter watched the large Potter clan leave the master bedroom of Potter Manor. They had been able to fit in only because everyone had stood very close together. As the room emptied, only his mother, who was sitting in a chair beside the bed, himself, his first son Remus, his first grandson Bill, and his first great-grandson Ian were left behind.

With a slow but still strong voice, Harry James Potter told his grandson, "Remus, get the things out of my study and bring them in here, the cot first please."

"Harry, are you sure you really should do this?" his frail but still spry wife asked.

"For the hundredth time, yes dear. I'm dying from whatever I have that even Hermione can't figure out, and I want to do this before I can't do magic anymore. Plus you know I'll wait for you on the other side. Bill, you and Ian come help me up." The two youngest men helped the patriarch of the family up and over to the cot Remus had set up, before Remus went back to the study for more things.

As Harry was laid on the cot, he watched Remus set it all up. He had picked Remus specifically for this. He was one of the smartest of his offspring and was in line to become Headmaster of Hogwarts soon. Harry loved his son James, but James had never excelled in magic. He knew people and had great heart, which had made him an excellent Minister for Magic for over twenty years, but for Harry's last act of magic, he needed someone like Remus. His grandson was well named for Harry's long gone friend. Harry was saddened as he considered his closest friends, most of them departed after various accidents over the years. They had always been an active lot.

Harry now had a little table on each side of him, with a piece of granite two feet on a side and two inches thick on one table, and a



pedestal of granite three feet high on the other table. Harry opened his shirt up and took the platinum key the size of his hand from Remus and laid it on his bare chest.

Before he could do anything else, Ginny came over and hugged him. "I love you Harry, and you can not truly leave me."

"I love you too Ginny, with all my heart. You don't have to do it, you know, I'll wait for as long as I have to."

She whispered into his ear for him alone, "It can not be any other way, Harry. As you must be true to yourself, so must I." Ginny tenderly kissed him and then stepped back to her chair and sat again.

James was not sure what to make of that conversation, especially as he had not heard his mum's whispers, but he could tell it had been significant by the look on his father's face.

"Remus? You have the book?"

"Yes Grandfather, I have The Book of Potter." He opened the book with all the family spells to the last page.

Harry had created it years ago. It had also been the cause of one of the biggest fights between he and Ginny over their relatively happy marriage of eighty-six years. He had charmed the book to only be openable and readable only by male Potters, so it would be kept in the family. To end the dispute, Harry had finally relented and made it readable by any Potter, but only a male could add to it. It would be passed down from first-born male to first-born male. Hence, the current occupants in the room; plus Ginny, whom he wanted there anyway.

"If this works, Remus, all of you, it can not ever be shared. The magic is too powerful," Harry instructed them.

Remus chuckled. "That's not a problem, grandfather. I don't know of anyone else who's powerful and skilled enough to do this magic."

Harry smiled. "Everyone, stand back." Harry reached out and grabbed the slab of granite with his left hand, and a corner of the pedestal's top with his right hand.

Everyone present listened to Harry Potter start to chant. Remus followed along in the book. His grandfather made no mistakes. He could not understand how his grandfather did this. Not only did the spell take a lot of magic, but it was done wandlessly. And how he had figured out the process and the spell mystified the younger man. After nearly two minutes, Harry spoke the final words of the spell and there was a great flash of light that blinded everyone in the room, before all that light and energy was sucked back towards the key so there was complete darkness for a split second.

When he could see again, Remus looked over to see his mother kneeling beside his father's body -- a body that had its arms hanging limply and was not breathing. Ignoring his emotions for the moment, Remus walked over and moved the granite slab to the floor, he shrunk the pedestal so it fit into his pocket and then picked up the platinum key off of his grandfather's chest. The once plain key now had an emerald stone in the big round handled end.

Pulling out the original Potter Family key, he touched his wand to it and left for the Potter vault in Gringotts. There, he enlarged the new pedestal and set it down in the vault next to the other pedestal that looked just like it. Putting the original key into his pocket, he touched his wand to the key that had come from his grandfather's magic. A second later, he was standing on the slab of granite in the master bedroom of Potter Manor. Testing again, he was back in the vault in front of the new pedestal, then back to Potter Manor.

"It works as expected, Dad," Remus said. "Grandfather has recovered the lost knowledge and given us a second key by infusing all of his magic into the device." The man put the two keys down, motioned to his son and grandson, and the three walked out to find their families.

"Mum..." their oldest sadly called.

"Leave me. I want to be alone with my husband."

"But Mum..."

"James! Don't make me hex you out that door. I will if I have to," she told him with teary and fiery eyes.

Her son looked at his mum, who had no wand on her, but that would not stop her from doing magic. She was one hundred and two, but he knew better than to go against her when she had that look on her face. He had seen it too many times as he grew up, as she handled twelve rambunctious children, which included two sets of twins. "Very well, I'll come back later and help you downstairs then."

As James turned to leave, he heard her start to sob. The last thing he saw before he closed the door was his mother putting her arm over his father's chest and sob, "Wait for me dearest..."

When he arrived downstairs, he saw his Aunt Hermione, the last of her generation along with his mother. "I'm sorry, Auntie, he passed on just a few minutes ago."

"I know, Remus told me. What is in this overly large crate over here?" she asked in her usual no-nonsense tone and brisk manner. She still had her "Professor Tone" and James instantly answered her.

"That crate has the coffin Mum ordered. It arrived only a couple of hours ago. I don't know why it was brought in here," the man answered.

"For the family viewing, of course. It is custom."

"Of course, Auntie. Shall I go up and bring Mum down so you can talk to her?"

"You left her alone?" Hermione looked amazed.

"Yes, she asked to be alone for a few minutes."

Hermione stood back up from her chair. "When is the family viewing and the funeral to be?"

"We'll have Dad's funeral day after tomorrow at three. The viewing will be in the morning. It will be here so we can avoid all the reporters and any crowds."

"As he would like it. Very well, I'll come back then for both of their funerals," Hermione told him.

"What?"

"Really now, James. Look at the size of this coffin. Did you not notice it was twice the normal width? And why did you think she sent you away at the end? I don't think those two have been apart for more than a few hours at any one time for the last fifty years. She's not going to start now." She cast her disapproving look normally reserved for dim students as she harrumphed, "Really."

James watched his aunt leave the living room to go back to her house. As everything settled into his brain, he turned and ran up the stairs. Opening the door to the master bedroom, he found his mother draped over his father, and she was paler than she should be. His aunt was right, as usual. It would be a double funeral, but James Harry Potter could tell by the happy look on her face, his mother was where she wanted to be, and that was how fate had meant it to be.

end

A/N: I hope you enjoyed the story if you've made it this far. :-) As you can tell, I will not be adding any more onto the end of this story. However, I have others out there you are welcome to read; and I have at least four more coming, though two of them are only in "notes form" at this time. If you add me as a "favorite author" (see link at the top of this page), you'll receive an email notificatoin when those come out. -- kb